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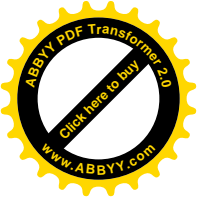
THE ALIEN DEBT
A Bantam Book I June 1984

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To Laura, *who sparked this book*

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I. Lisele

Introduction to "A Short Study of How UET Gained and Lost Power Over the Planet Earth," a thesis for the 2nd Junior Degree by Liesel Selene Moray, ages 8-1/2 bio and 18 chrono, approx.

In this paper written for Professor Diebolt's history department in the Junior University at Sancia Leckaby Spaceport, I will try to cover everything important from when the United Energy and Transport conglomerate won the sixth corporate bidding election and its Presiding Committee took over the rule of North America, to the time when the space fleet headed by my father, Bran Tregare Moray, freed Earth and dissolved UET's government.

UET controlled most of Earth from 2004 to 2103, and those weren't good years to live here. UET's Committee Police were bullies and killers, and their Total Welfare centers were slave camps, Rissa Kerguelen, my mother, was put into a Center when she was five (since she'd never left Earth, she had only one age) and was there for eleven years, almost. Her brother Ivan Marchant, my uncle, was in there even longer. There are books that explain about Total Welfare, and I've read two of them. But all you really need to know is that when somebody was WeSfared, UET took over everything that person owned and owed, and put the "client" into big barracks-type buildings where everybody wore jumpsuits and ate in messhalls. Male and female sections were separate, and each had three divisions: Pre-pube, Post-pube, and Adult. Those last two would be sent out in work



gangs, but most of their pay went to UET; the clients did get a little bit credited to their Welfare accounts, and the idea was that they could someday earn their way out of Welfare. But the way UET had it set up, nobody really did. The way my mother got out was by

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winning a big lottery prize. And the funny part was that she hadn't bought the ticket; her supervisor was doing a crooked trick with Post-pube clients' credits and it backfired. That's all ! know about it because she doesn't like to talk about Total Welfare much.

Another thing that began in 2004 was star travel. I think everybody knows by now that UET didn't invent it. An alien ship came here, and UET killed the aliens and stole their ship and copied it. Then they sent out colonies and did other things. But some ships Escaped and set up their own colonies which were called the Hidden Worlds because UET didn't know where they were. When my father took *Inconnu*, the first armed ship ever to Escape, UET called him "Tregare the Pirate." But you've seen on the Tri-V, I expect, how on the planet Number One he got six ships together and went to take over UET's fortress world Stronghold, and made a bigger fleet there and came back and took Earth away from UET. My mother helped, too. I was born on Stronghold, which is why I have two ages and know firsthand what the Long View is all about.

The Long View has to do with relativity, when you ride a ship that gets up close to the speed of light. I don't know the math yet (I get that next year, I think) but I do know that when we came from Stronghold to Earth it took about six months by ship's time and close to ten years by any planet's time. So if you ride ships very much, you have to keep the Long View in mind.

Those aliens that UET killed are called Shrakken; my parents have met some of them but I haven't. Tregare, my father, captured a ship of theirs and made a deal to use it for a decoy when he went into Stronghold. He gave me some pictures of them, which I will put in the Appendix to this paper.

We don't know much about the Shrakken; they are very strange. Sometimes they kill people, but my mother says they don't do it on purpose, because they have to lay eggs in a living creature the same as digger wasps do, and she likes them anyway. But when they lay eggs in people it kills the people. Caused trouble, for a while.

I was too little to do any of it myself, of course, but my family and friends had a big part in getting rid of UET's slave system. That's why a lot of them are on the Board of Trustees of Earth. There's Rissa and Tregare, my parents. Then my dad's parents, Liesel Hulzein and Hawkman Moray. I'm named for Grandma Liesel and for my other grandma, Selene Kerguelen, that UET killed when my mother was five. And there's Mom's

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brother Ivan Marchant and his mate Ilse Krueger, and my great-aunt Erika Hulzein who is Grandma Liesel's older sister.

If you don't know about the Hulzein Establishment, which Erika merged with the rest of our government last year, it was based on a parthenogenetic dynasty that lasted five generations, and was one of the few power groups that managed to hold out against UET. Parthenogenetic means a mother having a daughter with no father. It's not the same as cloning which never worked out very well, because the Hulzein method fertilizes one intact ovum with the nucleus of another from the same person. I'm not sure why this works better, but the details are outside the scope of this paper, anyway. However, my mother did this to have my baby sister Renalie, who is enough younger than I am that we won't have to have sibling jealousy, since I'm practically a half-generation in between her and my mother. My Grandma Liesel explained to me about that, and I'm glad she did, because Renalie is really a very nice baby.

There are quite a few more Trustees but for most of the list I think I'll wait and tell about them when they come in the main thesis. Except for why they belong on the Board. It's not a hard and fast thing, but several were ship's captains for Tregare when he took Stronghold and then squadron commanders in the fight for Earth. Tregare goes with people who do good work.

That's true of the new Trustee; you saw on the Tri-V about the appointment, probably. Derek Limmer, with the scarred face-he and his wife Feicie Parager stayed behind to run Stronghold for Tregare and only came to Earth this year on



one of the new Hoyfarul faster-than-light ships. Their son Arlen was my best friend on Stronghold and he used to be my same bio-age, nearly, but now he's nine years older because he stayed on Stronghold while Tregare's fleet chewed time. And then coming to Earth by FTL, Arlen didn't put much difference to his two ages. It seems strange, but that's the Long View for you.

There are a lot of other important people but as I said, I can tell about them when the time comes. Now I should end this introduction and get on with the main body of my thesis.

Note to Professor Diebolt: The main report, I'm afraid, will have to wait until we get back. I mean, the new armed FTL ship *Inconnu Deux* is going down-arm toward the galaxy itself, to help the Shrakken against some enemy that won't stop to talk; they only attack.

Some of the Board didn't see why we should go help the Shrakken, but Tregare says it's only common sense. That if these

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other aliens wipe out the Shrakken, we could be next. And Rissa, my mother, swung the Board vote by pointing out that if it weren't for the Shrakken we wouldn't even *have* star travel, because UET stole it from them. So we owe them, she says, and I think she's right. Also when she says that humans and Shrakken have killed each other, one way or another: "And that book is balanced; let us close it."

So *Inconnu Deux* is being readied to go down-arm. I don't know just when, but soon.

Rissa and Tregare aren't sure whether I'm going with them. But I am.

II Rissa

Drying her long, dark hair, Rissa

Kerguelen studied the tentative roster of *Inconnu Deux*. About a quarter the number she was used to: in a standard hull, Pennet Hoyfanil's FTL drive left much less room for quarters and supplies. Luckily, increased automation allowed the smaller crewing.

For a moment, Rissa frowned. It would be good to travel again with her brother, Ivan Marchant, but why wasn't his mate, Ilse Krueger, coming along? Trouble between those two? Since Ilse's disfigurement during the battle for Earth, her stability had sometimes been cause for worry.

No problem about the Kobolak twins, Anders and Dacia; those two had joined Tregare at Stronghold. Anders was bringing his wife, Alina Rostadt; Dacia remained persistently unattached.

Arlen Limmer: every time Rissa saw the young man she thought of how his father might look, without the terrible scars from UET's Space Academy. And Derek had incurred those scars when he was younger than Arlen was now.

Haskell Ornoway? Oh, yes! The ambush by misled cadets, when she and Tregare went to "civilize" the Academy. The boy

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who stood cradling a broken arm and asked the chance to redeem himself. Well, he'd made it.

She scanned down the list, finding no more familiar names. Two dozen adults, then, in all. Plus, despite Tregare's misgivings, young Lisele and her parthenogenetic half-sister, Renalle.

And, of course, Stonzai the Shrakken.

Hair coiled and piled high, Rissa stood and stretched. At the bio-age of twenty-eight, probably she could use more exercise, but she still looked and felt trim. If she'd changed much in the past five years, since the retaking of Earth, she couldn't detect it. Of course if she'd never *left* Earth, she'd be eighty now. Yes, there was something to be said for having two ages!



The door opened and Tregare entered. "Bran. You are home early." With their two decimeters difference in height, she was accustomed to stretching a little to kiss.

Lovemaking of late had been scarce. After Rissa's slow recovery from Renalle's difficult birth, pressure of work and social obligations had been intrusive. Especially now, with the preparations for *Inconnu Deux's* mission. So Rissa did not misread the messages of Tregare's eyes and hands. "There is time?"

"Should be." And on this occasion came none of the vagrant pangs left over from parturition; Rissa's cry of triumph came unbidden, as though someone else had made it. Then she lay relaxed.

Sitting up, Tregare grinned. "Back to your best, eh?"

"Or near to it. And, Bran-thank you for your patience." As they dressed, she said, "Bran? Does Stonzai come here alone for your meeting tonight, or with other Shrakken?"

"One other. Her mate: Sevshen, I think the name is. Hasn't much English, Stonzai reports, but is working on it. Stonzai, now-she came onscreen for a minute when Dacia called from the port-Stonzai claims she's studied the tapes you gave her back on Stronghold. But she still piles all her verbs in one place a lot."

Rissa smiled. Yes, the Shrakken leader had always given English a rather Germanic syntax, not easy to understand. But still, Rissa looked forward to seeing the alien again, and this evening's gathering would provide the occasion.

In preparation for that planning session, Tregare left to check the computer terminal and holographic projector that were

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newly installed in the dining area. Rissa went to see to her infant daughter, and found Renalle just waking. The weaning medication would stop Rissa's milk soon, so while they could, mother and daughter might as well enjoy the intimacy of feeding. Soon, making little sounds of contentment, the baby nuzzled. When she was satisfied, Rissa played with her until renewed signs of drowsiness appeared, then called the nurse from the next room. "Tonight it must be bottle feeding, for once the meeting begins I cannot count on getting free of it."

The woman nodded, and Rissa decided to look in on her older daughter. Entering Lisele's room, Rissa wondered why the child's choice of furnishings gave such an unchildlike effect. At any rate there would be no greetings or discussion now, for the girl sat crosslegged before her biofeedback console, obviously in the semi-trance "alpha state." Well, the regimen seemed to be relieving tensions from the competitive pressures of the Junior University. As Rissa watched, Lisele breathed evenly and deeply.

Her dark, wavy hair, currently rather short, set off her pale skin well. Tall for her age, she'd grow to be taller-though not so tall, Rissa hoped, as the twenty decimeters of Tregare's father, Hawkman Moray. Tregare's eighteen, she decided, wouldn't be too bad....

Turning to leave, she saw a sheet of readout trailing from Lisele's computer terminal, and gave it a quick look. Yes; the child was revising her thesis-introduction. Rissa smiled, then nodded: Lisele had her facts reasonably straight and clearly stated.

She checked her chronometer. As she had expected, it was time to rejoin Tregare.

She found him arranging potables at the small bar, set to one side of the dining area. Across that room sat the electronic gear he had come to inspect; presumably he was satisfied with it.

Now he glanced up and saw her. "Come have a drink. There's time to talk a little." Since Renalle's birth she had only recently resumed use of any alcohol at all; the mixture he poured for her was quite dilute.

Sitting in adjacent, padded bar chairs, they clinked glasses and sipped. "Thank you. Yes-the *Deux* roster. You list only names, nothing of rankings or positions."

He nodded. "Well, you won't know the Engineering people; they're mostly new to space. All trained with Hoyfanil's FTL group but only one of them has two ages." She waited, and he said, "Control officers, then. You're my First Hat, of course,

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and I like Anders Kobolak for Second." Rissa made to speak, but Tregare said, "Third, now-you remember a kid named Mask Ornavay?"

"Yes, after checking the name on computer. The ambush- and I am glad he has turned out well. But I do not understand-"

"You object to him?"



She shook her head. "No. But my brother Ivan-

"What about him? He's coming with us; you agreed to that."

"Tregare! Ivan Marchant was Ilse's First Hat on *GrafSpee*, and then Coordination officer for Falconer squadron. Yet now you give him no Hat at all? Is he to serve as a rating, under an untried boy like Ornaway?"

"Easy." One hand warded off her urgency. "Ivan's my Gunnery chief, rank roughly equal to First Hat but outside the Hats' chain of command, answering directly to me. For the fancy turret setup you designed, I think that's a full-time job."

Her eyes narrowed. "Outside the command-chain, you say. Yet he will answer not only to yourself. Any Hat who happens to be watch officer can call him to account."

Tregare's fist thumped the bar. "As my representative, sure. Same as the Chief Engineer takes orders, no matter *who* calls from Control. I don't see any problem."

Rissa paused. "Why, Bran? And you know what I mean."

Slowly, he nodded. "All right. In the battle for Earth, Ivan broke. Cut loose from his duties and went all-out after Admiral Ozzie Newhausen."

"And got him. Do not forget that."

His hand sliced air. "Got him, sure. But dumped every squadron responsibility, right in the middle of combat, to do it. No, Rissa. I value Ivan and you know that-but I want him where his skills will help and any lack of discipline can't hurt." Briefly, he grinned. "For his backup, I've assigned Dacia Kobolak."

Anger ebbing, Rissa said, "I cannot argue, Bran-though I wish I could." Her other thought, that Ivan's willingness to leave Ilse behind might be a trouble sign, she did not mention.

The afternoon's first arrival was Dacia Kobolak's scoutship. These small spacecraft, ordinarily carried by the fleet's full-sized ships, did not have interstellar range but found use in and near planetary systems-or as emergency lifeboats. They were de-

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signed to accommodate twelve passengers-but from this one, only a pair of aliens followed Dacia down the ramp.

Reaching ground, the sturdy redhaired woman still led the way. Behind her the tall, thin Shrakken, each wearing only a sort of harness hung with bulging pouches, came with their toe-dancing gait. Unlike bears or humans, Shrakken were not plantigrade. As Tregare put it, "The heel is a hock; that's where the extra height is." And indeed they were tall-at least the equal of Hawkman Moray. The taller one, Rissa recognized-squinting against dust raised by the landing-as her old acquaintance Stonzai, commander of *Sharanj*, the ship Tregare had captured on Number One so long ago. Commander wasn't quite the correct term among Shrakken, Rissa knew, but close enough. Now she noticed that Stonzai's ocher skin was brighter than her companion's, its brownish clown-markings more clearly defined.

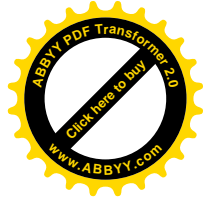
Closer now, Rissa saw eyelids blink horizontally across the black triangular eyes, each surmounted by a stubby pair of tendrils. The inverted-V mouth made what Rissa knew to be the equivalent of a smile. Passing Dacia with a quick, one-armed hug, Rissa moved to meet the Shrakken. "Stonzai!" and as when they had parted on Stronghold, each reached out fingers to touch the other's forehead.

Head moving in the Shrakken way that was neither nod nor shake, Stonzai spoke. "Again meet we; I to do so had not thought. But when in space we to Limmer talk, says he safe it is, us here to come; those here who Shrakken killed, now not rule. True, this is?"

"Yes, Stonzai. And-" She paused; it struck her that the other Shrakken had said nothing. And Tregare also stood quietly, as if uncertain. Rissa said, "Stonzai, do you remember Bran Tregare?"

"Remember, yes." Stonzai moved toward him, and without hesitation Tregare returned the forehead touch. Turning to her companion, the Shrakken said, "Sevshen, now also must you," and when the other did not move, spoke in their own language. Then Sevshen, too, came to both humans and exchanged the touch. Rissa's relieved sigh surprised her; she led the group indoors.

Surveying the dining area's golden-brown walls and glittering ceiling, Stonzai hissed approval. Tregare moved to the bar, and suddenly Rissa realized she had no idea whether Shrakken used alcohol. She opened a bottle and sniffed at it, then passed it to



Stonzai. Again she'd forgotten something; Shrakken had no visible nostrils. But Stonzai, holding the bottle near her open mouth, inhaled with a whooshing noise. Then she handed the liquor back. "I not this use."

Tregare shrugged. Before Rissa could think of anything to say, Stonzai pointed to the array of other bottles. "These, not have ! try. Different, they be?"

With a grin, Tregare said, "Different flavors, same principle;" his gesture welcomed her to sample further, and she did, opening one bottle after another and whooshing at it. Three she set aside, but the next-a brandy-she handed to Tregare.

"This I use." But before he could pour from it she said, "Do you, wait," and methodically she worked through the entire lot, approving only a few. "These, good are." Curious as to the alien's criteria, Rissa peered at the bottles and found her answer: grape versus grain. Brandy, cordials and most wines, Stonzai approved; whiskeys, rums, rice wine, she rejected. Mentally shrugging, she watched Tregare do the honors; without asking, he added ice to the spirits and handed glasses to the two aliens. They sipped, and each gave a short hiss.

For Rissa and himself he set up bourbon and ice, lightening hers with water, then said, "Let's sit down, shall we?"

Human-built chairs did not fit Shrakken very well, but a low divan seemed to suit them. And now Rissa spoke. "Tell us, Stonzai, about your enemies."

From down the galactic Arm the Tsa came. How far? Stonzai didn't know. How long since they had first appeared? The Shrakken's considerable time in space, shrinking time near light-speed, did not help Rissa guess at the period involved.

When Tsa came upon Shrakken they killed them, or did their Tsa best in the attempt. After the first meeting, no parleys, only attack. Tsa ships, said Stonzai, were comparable to human or Shrakken: in size, power, acceleration, and turning ability. So with the Shrakken's "home field" advantage of shorter supply lines, the first and second waves of Tsa attacks had been beaten off. Losses, yes. "Ships where all Shrakken dead were, or lacking minds were." But no major damage to Shrakken planets.

Then, after a lapse of time indeterminate to Rissa if not to Stonzai also, a third and greater assault had come. And that one had nearly succeeded. "Whole worlds, dead are. Or, like blind animals, remaining Shrakken crawl, and for roots dig." Stonzai blinked. "For food, to find. More good, I think, dead to be."

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"Yes," said Tregare. "From what you say, Stonzai, I have to agree." The temperature was mild, but sweat beads stood on his forehead.

To Rissa the point was clear. As Derek Limmer had reported, after meeting in space the Shrakken ship that then brought Stonzai to Earth, one more Tsa attack wave might well finish the Shrakken, might disrupt their civilization past rebuilding.

Tsa weapons? Tregare asked it. According to Stonzai, the Tsa's gunnery was more potent than Shrakken but less so than what she'd seen of Tregare's. At Stronghold he'd given Stonzai samples of the latter, for good will. But what with travel times-*the Long View*-the Shrakken could hardly have duplicated many by now.

The mind weapon, though-and now Rissa listened closely, for here seemed to be the crux of the danger. Leaning forward, holding the empty glass that Tregare wasn't alert to fill, Stonzai said, "Close enough the Tsa come, and like claws in the mind they reach. Of it, die, some do; others, to ship's danger, wrongly act. Tsa strikes, not the own self you be." She made a crooning groan. "What they do, to fight against, none can."

Frowning, Tregare asked, "*How* close, before their mind gadget gets to you?" In human-Shrakken communications, translation of quantities had never been a strong point, but after a time Rissa decided that the mind weapon's range had to be slightly greater than that of Tsa or Shrakken gunnery-somewhat less, therefore, than *Inconnu Deux's* turrets could muster.

She said as much; Tregare shook his head. "The grade of approximation we have here, that's no real handle." At Rissa's frown, he added, "No, our one edge is FTL, the Hoyfarul Drive we're taking to Stonzai's people. Without that, considering the distances, we'd be pretty useless as allies." And thinking the matter over, Rissa had to agree.



Stonzai produced one other datum: Tsa was the enemy's own name for its species, not a Shrakken coinage. But how this fact had become known, Stonzai could not explain.

On that subject the discussion ended. And then other guests began arriving.

As house staff relieved Rissa and Tregare from bartending and serving duties, the two took station to greet-informally- the new arrivals. Many of these Rissa did not know; her work dealt with coordination, while some now present worked with other Board members in their own specialties. But in the greet-

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ings Tregare dropped hints to tell Rissa what those specialties were.

As her brother Ivan approached with Ilse Krueger, Tregare said, "That's about the lot. You want to go pump those two, and ease your mind, feel free."

Smiling her thanks, Rissa faced the newcomers. Ilse Krueger showed few visible signs of her old injuries; the small woman moved like a young girl. Her blonde hair, chin length and curly, hid most of the scar that ran from mouth corner past where her left ear had been, up into the scalp. The thin white line no longer pulled her mouth askew. But Rissa knew the hair covered scar tissue that closed the former earhole; Ilse was half deafened. One touch of a heat beam did it; her survival was sheer luck.

First the handshakes and polite words; then Rissa took each by a hand. "Come, let us have drinks, and talk."

Grinning, teeth glinting against his pale skin, her brother pushed back a lock of dark hair. "You mean, ask questions."

"That, too." And when the three found drinks and sat down, Rissa began. "*Inconnu Deux* will be out a long time. What is wrong, that you agree to such an indefinite separation?"

"Well, it's just-"

"The trouble is-"

Speaking together, then Ilse and Ivan smiled at each other and explained in turn. As the Board's trouble-shooter, Ivan was away from home more than not. But groundside, usually-whereas Ilse, in charge of combat training programs on the cadet ships, was in space quite often. "We're apart so much," said Ilse, "that we can never settle differences. All we do is tippy-toe around everything, to avoid argument." And Ivan nodded.

"So the answer," said Rissa, "is to be together not at all?"

"Trial separation," said Ivan. "Then maybe-"

"And meanwhile," Ilse put in, "it won't hurt either of us to be free people for a time."

Ivan shook his head. "No, Ilse. I've said it before; you be free if you wish, but it's not for me." He stood and walked to the bar. His stride, Rissa thought, would not encourage anyone to get in his way.

Ilse turned the talk to *Inconnu Deux* and kept it there. Well, the smallest person ever to survive UET's Space Academy *had* to be rather stubborn. Then it was time for dining-and the long discussions, buttoning up the needs of *Inconnu Deux*.

Hagen Trent, the ship's chief engineer, impressed Rissa. Young for his rank but balding early, his enthusiasm matched his

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obvious intelligence. He had studied directly under Pennet Hoyfarul, and after a tour in space he hoped to work in the improvement of FTL-drive design. His hand brushed the bulky curly fringe of his remaining hair. "We're still in the first phases. A few more years-" Then the man's female companion needed his attention, and he was led off toward the snack buffet.

Rissa's glass was empty; she strolled to the bar. A distinctive bottle attracted her attention-berry brandy from the planet Far Corner. She pointed, and the young attendant poured her three centimeters of the ruddy amber fluid. Sipping the tart flavor, she remembered-one-armed Bret Osallin, killed so long ago in Peralta's mutiny, had first offered her this drink. So long ago...

The lights blinked-Tregare's signal that business would commence-and Rissa brought her mind from Far Corner to Earth.

With considerable juggling of dials but less swearing than Rissa expected, Tregare got the holographic projector stabilized. Then, on the computer keyboard



he punched combinations. In the dimly lit end of the big room a belt of white stars appeared.

His hand moved; one star turned green. "Us," he said. More movement, and a group of stars, spread among others that were unaffected, glowed a darker orange. "The Shrakken suns. Not entirely accurate, I expect, but the best info we have." Another touch, and two lights went red. One, the nearer to Earth, blinked. Tregare pointed. "Shaarbant, that one. Peripheral to the main volume of Shrakken space, and a good place to refuel on our way to Stenevo, their major world," and he pointed to the other red star.

"The distances we're talking about-well, more than half the width of our galactic Arm, and down it a little less than that. We and the Shrakken, both, have expanded more along the arm than across it. Shaarbant's closer to us than any other Shrakken world. So that's where we go first."

Beside him, Stonzai said something Rissa did not hear. Tregare nodded and made another adjustment; now several of the orange lights began to blink. "These, mostly toward the inner-arm side of Shrakken space, are the ones the Tsa have attacked." Nearly half, Rissa saw, of the Shrakken total. Tregare touched more keys, and four of the blinking stars dimmed. "Dead worlds," he said. "Killed by the Tsa."

He looked to Stonzai, but the alien gave no further sign.

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Tregare stepped back from the terminal. "For now, I guess that's all the briefing." But then there were questions, and he answered them; the meeting lasted another hour.

Three days later, *Inconnu Deux* was on its way.

///. Elzh

Long, now, since Elzh with seven ships left dear homeland. Long enough to crass much of space shown on the Tsa-Drin chart, passing wide of mindbeast planets that knew the Tsa. Scouts had found new beastworlds; these the Tsa-Drin had charted for Elzh to study, and if possible, to destroy. As correct, as understood. To learn, then to obey.

From when Tsa first met beasts, Tsa must fight-Tsa ships against beastworlds, lest beast ships come to Tsa worlds. Since beasts gave Tsa no peace, then beasts must die-though the toll, in Tsa minds and Tsa lives, was frightful.

But, to obey. Seven ships and the Tsa-Drin chart, and only a few more cycles to the new beastworld. To obey.

But now, to gather. Freeing thought, Elzh began mind-say.

In the nest. Grouped with Idsath and Tserln, mindsay soft and murmurous, *Elzh* felt warmly indling. Nothing to hurt, as always between Tsa. Except-until their sex-progression stabilized, Elzh's incomplete maleness gave irritation, an itch without satisfaction. *No matter* (Idsath); *soon*. Fully ready as moderator, Idsath-to accept and blend Elzh's genes and Tserln's, and return them to Tserln for fruition. Had the Tsa-Drin plan allowed for increase, all of that would happen. Now, though, the first stages, in themselves ecstatic, could not go on to completion. Tserln, when wholly female, would bear that frustration of deep Tsa instinct.

As you accepted it (Tserln, to the unworded thought), *shall*

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I, also. Touching as fully as now might be, the three shared warmth.

Then time to leave the nest, to share food instead, and with others of the crewing. Still, touching could be, but lesserly-as correct, as understood. Mindsay, with so many together, was slower-each giving much quiet between sayings.

Even so, dread of beastworld grew in Elzh's thought. To mindsay the fear would



lessen it, but Elzh did not.

IV. Tregare

Eighty hours from Earth, the *Deux* passed light-speed; Bran Tregare shrugged in relief. It wasn't that he distrusted the Hoyfarul Drive, but after all, he'd grown up believing in Einstein. Not that the ship's ellipsoidal, coherent drive field, which shielded the *Deux* from the effects of a hundred gees or more, contradicted "Saint Albert"-not exactly. Velocity still built mass, but that mass appeared in parallel continua that held no other matter. "In fact," Doctor Hoyfarul had once said, "it's possible that the drive *creates* those extra universes. I can't vouch for the idea, either way."

And when Tregare insisted that mass was still mass, and required force to accelerate it, Hoyfarul's laugh shook the wattles at his throat. "In a continuum with all mass concentrated in one object," he said, "how do you define acceleration? Or, for that matter, motion?"

Tregare laughed too, then, and gave up the argument. Now, with all die *Deux*'s external sensors-except the gravitic detectors- showing zerch, the ship was unmistakably outpacing light. But it wasn't chewing time, or not by much; in FTL travel the "Long View," the passage of years while the ship experienced only months, was not a factor. Not much of one, anyway. There was still a residual second-order effect in the "home" continuum, but it was logarithmic and grew very slowly. At their top speed for

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this voyage-about 120 lights, Hoyfarul had estimated it-time-dilation would only briefly exceed three-to-one. As compared, Tregare reflected, to the twenty-to-one average for STL runs. No, this time-on a run of about one year, subjective-his two ages wouldn't diverge much farther.

Satisfied, he nodded to his watch officer, Anders Kobolak, and left Control. Boots clattering on the stairs, he headed downship. About now, he figured, Rissa would be feeding baby Renalle. In case she might like some coffee, after, he stopped by the galley. Ivan Marchant, sitting with Dacia Kobolak, waved a hand. "Bran! Have we passed light yet?"

"Surest thing you know." Tregare filled a small carafe with coffee. "I wonder if I'll ever get used to having most of ray instruments go dead, this side of C."

"I know," said Ivan. "I was on Hoyfarul's first test flight; remember? But our inside sensors, the inertial ones, do integrate thrust measurements and give us valid course vectors."

"And speed and position, and maybe what's for breakfast next," Tregare said. "It all works; yeah. But still-" In his own voice he heard the plaintive note. "I do miss the hell out of my old *Inconnu!*" He held up the carafe. "I'll get this down to Rissa."

He found Rissa closing her blouse and beginning bottle-feeding. "I am nearly dry now, Bran, but still she likes to test me."

"Smart baby." Wordless signals set him to pouring coffee for Rissa and himself. He said, "You check the freeze-chambers lately?"

"Yes. Stonzai and Sevshen both seem stable; though Dacia felt unsure of dealing with the Shrakken metabolism, it appears she has done well." The problem had been the onset of Stonzai's ovulation. The ship carried no host animals for her voracious larvae, and now, after repeated use, the anti-ovulation drag caused increasing side effects. So freeze was the only reasonable answer-and since Sevshen understood little human speech, he joined his mate in cryogenic stasis rather than remaining awake and isolated.

"Right." Then Tregare had another thought. "Let's turn the freeze-chamber checkup over to the comm-tech of each watch, should we? I mean, with the outside



circuits dead, up here above light, those people haven't much else to do." Rissa nodded agreement.

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The *Deux's* freezers had features new to Tregare; for one thing they could double as emergency acceleration tanks, with or without the freezing function. Sure as peace, he thought, progress sometimes did complicate things!

Hunger satisfied, the baby pushed the bottle aside. Rissa burped her, cuddled her, and put her down for sleep. As Tregare poured warmups for their coffee, Rissa sat. She said, "Our timing and position, Bran. Are there enough data yet, to check Hoyfarul's estimates?"

He spread his hands. "Not for certain sure. We have better accel than the earlier FTL ships. Time ratio, though-now we've passed light, there's no way to check it. But going by what we do have, I think the curve's flatter than the doc predicted."

Rissa nodded. "Then the difference between any person's two ages here will increase less than we had thought." Her brows raised. "As of now, how do the figures look?"

"Guessy." Too much coffee had Tregare's nerves on edge. A drugstick would have helped, but he and Rissa didn't smoke those when Renalle or Lisele were around to breathe the stuff. The sticks weren't harmful; a doctor at the Junior University had suggested Lisele use them for her tension problems. But Rissa and Tregare had misgivings about putting so young a child on a chemical crutch, and now, of course, she didn't need it. Too bad, Tregare thought, he couldn't make biofeedback work for *him*. Shrugging, he poured himself a short drink. *First today.*

He thought back to Rissa's question. "Our time to Shaarbant, maybe a subjective year. If our data's accurate-not to mention, if I figured it right-we use up about two-and-a-half years, groundside time, getting there."

Her eyes widened. "So many? Then, even without the shorter trip on to Stenevo, if that is needed, or any consideration of time spent groundside on either world, by Earth's clocks we shall be gone at least five years. Ilse and Ivan-she is not young, Bran!"

Tregare sighed. "If you don't know what makes those two tick, how could I? Maybe they're *pfft* and this is the polite way out."

"No. Ivan told her, she might consider herself free if she chose, but he would not do the same. I-"

Wanting out of a problem that gave him no handle on it, Tregare interrupted. "They married freestyle. What Ivan does, or doesn't, is his own business. But if he doesn't, I miss my guess." While he had the floor, he added, "Ilse isn't all that old.

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Maybe eight years, she has on Ivan. You think a few more are going to bother him all that much?"

Obviously unsure, Rissa frowned. "When we were taken to Welfare I was five, and Ivan eight. But since then, it has been as though I were the elder, to worry about him."

A way out of this, maybe: 'He had it rough. Any place in UET was a good place to keep your head down. *You* did, by instinct. Ivan was just at the age when he couldn't. And suffered for it."

She nodded. "Perhaps you are right. And in no case will it profit me, to worry so far into our subjective future years."

Well, now. Off the hook. And then Lisele came to tend her sister while her parents went to the galley for dinner.

Three weeks later Tregare reran Haskell Omaway's astrogation figures through the computer. The tall young man, running fingers over his close-cut blond hair, looked anxious. "Did I get it right?"

"Seems so." However accurate the measuring systems were, they were all the ship had. In theory, inertial instruments measured thrust, along-course or lateral, and integrated the cumulative effect with respect to time. Tinhead, the computer, gave results in terms of velocity and ship's position.

There was a fudge factor: the frictional coefficient of the "interstellar gas." Either it varied or it didn't. But within limits of error, the *Deux's* position as determined by inertial means checked with gravitic detection of landmark stars. So Tregare said, "We came out with the same answers, anyway."

Visibly, Omaway relaxed. "Sir-Tregare, I mean-were you as nervous, your first trip, as I am?"



Tregare snorted. "Me? With Butcher Korbeith commanding, and every few days lining up all the cadets naked and maybe thumbing one of us to be spaced out the airlock? *Nervous? I was scared shitless the whole time.*"

Face reddened, the boy's gaze dropped. "I'm sorry. I should have thought. It's only-"

Tregare gripped the other's shoulder. " 'sail right, Hask. Don't mind an old-timer's stories. And you're doing fine." He took one more scan of the monitors, decided they weren't telling him anything new, and left Control. Thinking: *Yes, the kid's shaping up into a good capable Third Hat.*

Ambling downship, Tregare mused. The trouble with FTL travel was no *input*, to keep the mind interested. On the ship's

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monitors, nothing from outside except the gravitic readings. No possibility of signals from another ship, not that any others were apt to be in this part of space. Why, it was almost as bad as riding cargo!

Heading for quarters he passed the galley and looked in. Seeing Rissa at a table with her brother Ivan, Dacia Kobolak and Arlen Limmer, he got himself a cold beer and joined them. "How's it shake?"

Looking a little tense, as he often did, Ivan Merchant shrugged. Rissa said, "Now that only the drive room has any real work to do, we are running out of diversions. I know the Shrakken data tapes by heart. If only Stonzai were not in freeze! Then we could talk, at least, in search of new information."

Arlen Limmer didn't look bored. At seventeen the swarthy youngster, still thin and gawky, had matched his father's height. He said, "I've got so much to learn, it keeps me busy. Navigation, comm-panels-for when there's someone to talk with-and next week I start learning gunnery."

Patting his hand, Dacia said, "You're lucky," and went on to detail her own boredom. Between her and Rissa and Ivan, the talk was working into a real gripe session.

Tregare quit listening; he almost had an answer. What had Arlen said? "Oh, sure! Gunnery practice."

"What?" At least three of them said it together.

"Gunnery practice. A contest. Maybe a series of them, if the idea catches on. Three teams, say, to share the six peripheral turrets." He thought back; yes, all six were rigged for computer simulation runs. "Now for team captains we want our three best gunners. Rissa and Ivan, I know you're tops, but who's next in line?"

Ivan laughed. "Dacia is. She's crowding the both of us."

"Not quite," said the redhead. "But I should, one of these days, with all the coaching you've given me."

Arlen Limmer frowned. Jealous, Tregare wondered, of the woman's headstart in gunnery? No matter; thoughts fully into the new project, he asked Rissa to set up the teams. "Spread the trained ones around as evenly as you can figure it. But *anybody* can enter as novices, assigned at random. Let's see; that's eight to a team, and-

"Not exactly. / want to try, too." Tregare turned. He hadn't heard his daughter come in, but there she stood, and he knew the determined expression on her face.

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"Why not?" said Ivan. "I'll bet you have the reflexes for it." The child waited until Tregare nodded and then Rissa, before she thanked them, got a glass of fruit juice, and left.

Looking after her, Rissa said, "Contesting with that one, novice or no, it may behoove all of us to sharpen our skills."

"I'm not worried," said Tregare. And he wasn't; he'd never been much in the gunnery line, anyway.

A day later, though, he climbed to Turret Two, to see how rusty he really was at converging a pair of laser beams on target and heterodying them to produce peak infra-red energy. "Melts a hull like going through cheese, if you're tuned right," was a fair description of the effect.

Working the turret controls against computer-simulated targets, Tregare felt sweat bead his hairline. His right-hand lever controlled an ellipse on the screen before him; when he tilted it straight, it became a circle, which meant he had his heterodyne right. To either side of the screen was an indicator light; the left one



blinked and he moved the other lever to extinguish it. Both lights dead meant his convergence-his range-was also correct; within the screen's circle a dot appeared; signifying that he'd scored a hit. The circle tilted; he corrected; the simulated distance made a rapid change and his left hand moved again. When the computer run ended, his readout tape clunked out one number. Forty-eight. He grimaced; throughout the run he'd held destructive energy on target only 48% of the time possible. *Not too good-and that run was an easy one.* But at least he hadn't used the emergency override pedal, that doubled the combined range-heterodyne tolerance to let the gunner try desperation shots. And scored only half-value when hits *were* made on override.

Tregare stood. All right, he needed more practice. But now, time to check the watch log. First things first.

On the log, no problems. An anomalous blip where, above light speed, none should have teen-but then a component-failure (and replacement) entry, initialed by Haskell Ornoway, that explained the discrepancy. Tregare nodded. Good maintenance-that was what kept a ship working. He headed down toward quarters.

On the galley landing he heard voices. "-that old man!" Arlen Limmer sounded like a bear with a sore ear; rounding a turn, Tregare found the youngster gripping Dacia Kobolak's arm.

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"Four years older than I am," she said. "And you're nine younger, so that makes me an old woman, doesn't it? If I-"

"He's married!"

"Freestyle. Aden, don't-" Limmer was the first to see Tregare; his hand squeezed the arm. Looking around, Dacia stopped talking.

Well. None of Tregare's business, likely. He said, "Hi, people," and walked past them and on his way downship.

After Rissa came off watch, she and Tregare ate together- his lunch, her dinner. Now, as she briefly nursed Renalle, they had time to talk. "-one problem, yes," she said. "Perhaps this ship is designed *too* efficiently. On the old ones we had nearly a hundred people; here we are only two dozen, and personal interactions may become overly important."

The baby fell into sleep, and Rissa put her to bed in the adjoining compartment. Now Tregare lit one of the small, black cigars he habitually carried but rarely smoked. When Rissa was back, he said, "How long's it been going on? And how far?"

Her hair hung loose; the headshake rippled it. "To both questions, I am not certain. Ivan spends much time with Dacia, and young Arlen-" Her smile was lopsided. "Not to make sport of him, but he *is* seventeen, and follows her like a puppy."

"You shipped on *Inconnu* at seventeen-and I was nearly the age Ivan is now."

"I have never allowed you, Bran, to apologize for your coercive behavior at that time. But if you continue to remind me-" She smiled, though, so he knew she wasn't really angry.

Still, he scowled. "So, are Ivan and Dacia into anything yet?"

Another headshake. "If they are, it is none of our concern. But Arlen thinks so, and he is infatuated and quite jealous."

Then Tregare got the point. "Yeah. If Arlen gets a bug up his nose and jumps Ivan, without giving your brother time to think before he moves-" He stood.

"Yes," Rissa said, "that is what concerns me." Her brows lifted. "Bran-where are you going?"

"To talk to somebody."

"To whom?"

"Whoever I run into first. I don't care which."

As it happened, he first came to Dacia Kobolak's quarters. Well, all right-it was her show, too. He knocked, and after a

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wait the door opened. Dacia looked a little mussed-up-and inside the room, so did Ivan Marchant. Ivan said, "Tregare, it's not what you think. I mean-"

"What I think, Ivan, makes no difference."

"Then why-?" Biting his lip, Ivan said nothing more.

"Yes, why?" said Dacia. "Because you've never been a nosy skipper."



"And I'm still not. Your business, the both of you, is your own. Young Limmer, though: he seems to think it's his, too." Tregare waited.

"Well, it's not." As she tried to pat her wavy red hair into order, Dacia's tone came cold. "I like Arlen, but his possessive-ness gets annoying."

Before Ivan could speak, Tregare cut in. "What worries me is, if the kid blows up on Ivan. Because-

Shrugging, Marchant said, "He's no danger to me; you know that."

"Hell, no!" Angered, Tregare said, "But you are to *him*!"

Ivan looked puzzled. "You think I'd hurt Derek's son, and FeJcie's?"

"Course not, given time to *think*." Tregare saw Ivan's expression clear, and Dacia's. "But if he caught your kill-trained reflexes off-guard-you didn't break Ilse's wrist on purpose, Ivan, when she got a little rough on your honeymoon. But you still broke it. Y'see?"

Ivan's breath shuddered out. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Just so you do, now." Tregare's own sudden smile surprised him. "Well, that's all I had; see you." Turning, he left the room.

Back in quarters when he told Rissa, she said, "And shall you speak with Arlen also?"

"If the occasion suits. I don't think it's too important."

"But to arrange matters for him without his knowledge- that is to treat him like a child, not a man."

"Hmmm? Yeah, I guess you're right." So, first chance he got, Tregare sounded young Limmer out. The boy obviously had a real crush and a lot of jealousy, but his angry resentment of Ivan Marchant was not-it seemed-keyed to thoughts of violence.

What he said, glowering, was, "Dacia's not the only woman on this ship. I'll show her!"

Noticing a young comm-tech walk past, Tregare nodded in the direction of the slim, long-haired blonde. "Starting now, maybe?" The boy grinned, and turned to walk after her.

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When Tregare reported to Rissa, she commented, "This young woman-Jenise Rorvik, I think? Is she unattached?"

Tregare shrugged. "I don't keep track. She's more the right age, though. A little older than Arlen, but not much."

Smiling, Rissa said, "And Arlen is not new to space; he has the cachet of two ages. I wonder if he knows how to make use of it."

The upcoming gunnery tournament, Tregare decided, did have the people interested. He'd run his own averages up into the high fifties including one fluke sixty-eight; he'd never be an ace gunner but at least he wouldn't let his team down.

Practice logs showed some novices making progress while others couldn't shoot fish in a barrel. Jeremy Crowfoot, the ship's computer expert, had an odd visual problem: he couldn't "see" the heterodyne circle and range lights simultaneously. So he had dropped out and would stick to programming the simulations.

But Lisele's entry evened the teams at eight members each. Noting his daughter's listed scores, Tregare chuckled. The child had speed and coordination, but her reach wasn't up to it yet; working with adult-sized gear she started well but tired quickly. She'd refused, though, the offer of an extension bracket to allow her to use the override pedal: "That's for your last chance, and uncle Ivan says none of the *good* gunners train with it."

Well, Tregare decided, she'd pull her weight on Dacia's team. Averages, nothing special, but surprisingly hot at the starts. He filed the logs away and took a summarizing look around Control. Everything running smooth, as usual.

No new input, also as usual.

Well, time for lunch.

IVAN

He hadn't intended this. Nobody but Ilse, he'd told himself-not ever. Yet now as his pulse slowed again, it was Dacia his arms held. Red hair, not blonde, against his cheek-and a sturdy, full-bodied young woman instead of his tiny, wiry Ilse.

Perhaps his breathing changed, for Dacia said, "Ivan? Are you all right? You're



not sorry, are you?"

"I-we shouldn't have, that's all. But-"

"You *are* sorry. Well, I'm not-except for how *you* feel. And surely you didn't plan to be some kind of monk the next two or three years?"

"I hadn't really thought it out." In his boyhood, years of UET's brutal "aversion therapy" had left him impotent. Later, under drug hypnosis, after Tregare had sprung UET's killer booby traps, Rissa had done something for his mind. So that the same day he met Ilse Krueger, he made love with her. And moved into her ship *Graf Spec*, working up to First Hat in short order. And never had any other woman.

He had now, though, and warm Dacia Kobolak looked unhappy. Trying not to be noisy about it, Ivan took a deep breath. "It's how I saw myself, you understand? All solid and permanent. Finding out I'm something different, it's a jolt. But no, Dacia-" A quick kiss, he gave her. "I'm not sorry. Just having a bit of trouble adjusting."

Her frown lines smoothed. "Then this won't be all of it?"

"You bet your little pink-I mean, sure not, Dacia."

"I'm glad." Up along his sides, to tickle, crept her fingertips. Slowly and gently, because he'd warned her of his reflexes and cited Ilse's broken wrist. So Dacia gave those reflexes due

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notice that here was no attack. "Back on Earth, if you and Ilse are pair-closed, I won't argue. But now-"

Enough tickling; not harshly, he caught her hands. "Now? A little soon, wouldn't you say?"

"Not if you let me finish the sentence. Now, I meant, we can be together. And *right* now, aren't you hungry? I am." Pushing just enough, she rolled free of him and they dressed.

On their way up to the galley, Ivan tried to think. Ilse had *told* him to be free, hadn't she? But still...

They ate quickly, for Dacia was due on watch soon. As she was about to leave, Rissa joined them, and after a little talk, Dacia hurried away. Ivan stood also, but Rissa said, "Oh, stay a while; keep me company." Feeling somehow uneasy, he sat.

Eating slowly, Rissa asked no questions, but under her gaze his tension built. Finally he said, "All right, we're lovers. Just now, though; not before."

Her eyes moved slightly; that was all. "Ivan, I did not ask."

Even to him, his laugh sounded nervous. "No. You merely read me like a book."

"If so, a book I enjoy and respect. And what of this is my business? And what, that you think I might disapprove?" Rissa spoke softly, and in her face he saw no mockery.

He moved, not quite a shrug, and found himself telling Rissa his earlier thoughts. "I want it to be all right. Do you think it is?" And how had she come to be his arbiter?

Rissa pushed her empty plate away. "Ivan, our total experience shapes each of us. Yours has fixated you more upon Ilse than is-well, usual. More so than she could possibly be on you, for instance, since her life has been more varied." She smiled, then shook her head. "Between you and Dacia I see nothing wrong. Would it be better, on this ship, for you to share yourself only with your memories?"

While he was thinking that one over, she changed the subject, and Ivan found himself explaining his ideas, as Gunnery Officer, for best utilizing the seven-turret configuration Rissa had designed. Ordinarily a ship's nose carried eight turrets arranged in a circle, each with traverse and separate range and convergence controls. *Inconnu Deux* had a larger, much more powerful central turret, firing along the ship's axis only, without traverse capability, ringed with six traversible projectors that were also beefed up, somewhat, from standard. Considering the possibili-

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ties of the new setup, trying to adapt usual fire-control techniques, had cost Ivan more sleep than he'd care to admit. He did, though, have a few ideas.

"I've rigged some circuits. Tie all turrets to central control and fire strictly line-of-flight; in a tight spot you've got a lot of punch. Or hang the six peripherals together, traverse and all, under one gunner, and play 'Chopsticks' with 'em, against Big Baby in the middle. And-" He knew he sounded overly enthusiastic, like a kid, but what



the hell? Until Rissa had to leave, they talked on.

Then Ivan went to his quarters—normally First Hat's billet, but of course Rissa shared captain's digs with Tregare. Pouring himself a mild drink, he sat to think a few things out.

First he tabled some questions. Whether he'd done right to agree to Ilse's desire for a separation, and to come on the *Deux*, made no difference. He was here; she wasn't. Case closed.

He hadn't realized, though, how much the trip would increase their biological age-difference. Let's see; he was thirty, and Ilse about thirty-eight. And if he had it right, she'd pick up seven or eight while he was adding maybe three. Well, that shouldn't matter, not really. *And Dacia was how old? Twenty-six.*

Dacia. Ivan had never minded the scars Ilse had from her brutal training at UET's "Slaughterhouse." But Dacia's unmarred skin—Ivan shook his head. Fixated, Rissa had said. Would he become fixated on Dacia's youth and beauty? To Ilse's cost? No, he must never let himself downgrade Ilse Krueger; she'd given him too much.

Which, for now, left him only one question. Should Dacia move into his quarters? Or rather, he realized, *when!*

A week before the gunnery contest, Ivan showed his file of combat-simulation tapes to Jeremy Crowfoot. "Your job now, Jere, to pick a good variety for competition. The coding on each run tells you whether it's a straight shot, skew curve, or whatever."

Tregare, sitting in, suggested leading off with easier runs, to help the novices get their feet wet. Crowfoot agreed. While the records showed him as part-Amerind, Ivan didn't think he looked the part: brown hair, ruddy skin, and freckles. Now the man said, "UET had these contests between ships' crews, right?" Tregare nodded. "What was the format?"

"Two ways," said Tregare, "depending on who ran the show. Butcher Korbeith liked one-hour sessions, nonstop. Wear

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everybody out and then call 'em quitters when their reflexes sagged."

"Whatever the other way was," Ivan said, "I like it better."

"Me, too," said Bran Tregare. "Okay—still an hour for each squad, but ten minute chunks, rotating between squads."

"Fine," Crowfoot said. "I'll do up six ten-minute sets, progressively harder but not predictable by pattern. All right?"

The session broke up. Checking practice logs, Ivan shook his head. Some novices had leveled off at their natural limits of skills, but a few had skimmed practice. On Ivan's own team, for instance, Comm-Tech Jenise Rorvik.

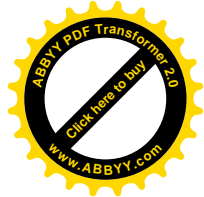
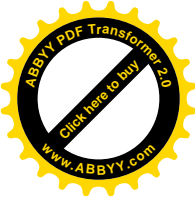
Rorvik? Oh yes, the blonde that Arlen Limmer was chasing, lately. Except that he did it more when Dacia was there to see. When Dacia moved away, Arlen's gaze followed her.

Silently, Ivan groaned. Now, if he wanted to help his own team's scores, he had to spend time with Limmer's *new* girl friend. *Marchant—if you've got any tact, now's the time to use it!*

Finding Jenise and Arlen in the galley, Ivan approached them. Limmer looked up under lowered brows; the woman smiled. Well, say it right out. "How shakes it? Rorvik, with a week left before our shootout, you're short of practice. If you have time for a session now, so do I." And before the boy could react, "Like to come along, Limmer? Turret Six, plenty of room." He paused, then moved—knowing that if he'd timed it right, they'd follow. They did, and the three climbed to the turret.

Leading, Ivan took the gunner's seat. "I'll make sure everything's working right." He hoped for a complex run, a chance to show his skill, and that's what he got. He scored a sixty. "It's all on the money, Rorvik. Your turn."

Her first run was pathetic; she had the reflexes, but hadn't trained them. Ivan said nothing. Arlen looked at him, then turned to Jenise. "You have to coordinate your controls. Keep your eyes a little out of focus, to cover the screen and range lights both, without looking back and forth." She nodded. "Now imagine your left hand's connected to the lights; just move it toward the one that's lit, to put it out. No—not so *hard!*" Surprised, Ivan saw the boy was sweating. "And Jenise—imagine your right hand *on* that ellipse, and push just enough to straighten it up into a circle. Yes; and now—"



As he talked, her performance improved. At the run's end her score was still nothing to brag about, but most of the hits came toward the finish. Ivan punched the stop-button. Arlen looked at him, "Did I do something wrong?" "No. You did a lot of things *right*. Care to take over now, on your own? You don't need me, and I've got work piled up." "Well, of course," said Limmer, "if you think I'm qualified." "I think you are." Before leaving, Ivan turned back. "One hour. Ten-minute sessions, five-minute breaks. Agreed?" The two nodded. "And the same every day, from now to shootout?" Nods again. "Good. Thanks for helping, Limmer." Arlen cleared his throat. "Glad to, Marchant." A good line to end on, so Ivan went downship. By then he was hungry-and also a bit satisfied with himself.

First he went to quarters, to bathe and change clothing. Then to the galley, climbing fast-"on the high lope" as Tregare liked to say. And there he found the captain sitting with Dacia's brother, Second Hat Anders Kobolak. Lean and brown-haired, Anders didn't much resemble his fraternal twin. Ivan filled a tray and joined the two, half his attention on listening to the talk and half on eating. When he was down to coffee, laced with spicemix and sugar and something that pretended to be cream, he listened more.

"This awards setup, now," Tregare said. "To put a little zip in the gunnery contest. You tell it, Anders."

The way Kobolak put it, it sounded simple enough. Personnel scoring in the top third-except control officers and team captains-got graduated bonuses if they weren't in gunnery as a job, and points toward promotion if they were.

Ivan nodded. "Sounds good to me."

Tregare stood. "Me, too. Write up the skeds, will you, Anders, for the points and bonuses?" The Second Hat nodded, and Tregare walked away, leaving Ivan with Anders Kobolak and a fresh cup of coffee Ivan didn't really want. But now he could hardly leave without drinking it, and it was too hot to gulp.

His own cup dry, Kobolak sat silent. *What is he thinking?* Then, abruptly, the man said, "Is there anything we need to talk about?"

Ivan's sip scalded his tongue. "You're the one who asked."

Anders nodded. "Yes. Well-Dacia seems happier lately. To my mind, she's always been too much of a loner. I know that

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whatever happens here is temporary. But I hope she doesn't get hurt."

Looking, Ivan knew the man didn't mean his statement as any kind of threat. "I hope the same," he said. "I'll try."

"That's what I figured. But I'm glad you said it." The Second Hat stood, and left Ivan to drink the coffee or not.

That night, Ivan dreamed. A little girl was calling his name-a child with a red dress and long dark pigtails. He tried to go to her, but someone larger pulled him away. He shouted; they *had* to let him be with her. But between them the door closed. He woke, chilled but sweating, and realized that whatever the hour he was done with sleep. He got up, made coffee, and sat thinking.

The dream: the day, when he was eight and Rissa five, that they'd been taken to Total Welfare. It hadn't been quite that way, though. He couldn't remember directly, after the hashing his mind had taken from the Welfare Center's "discipline," but from Rissa he knew the Welfare agent had made them exchange their own clothes for grey-blue jumpsuits *before* taking them to the Center. So the red dress was earlier than the separation.

The dream still bothered him. By choice, he never looked back at the Welfare years. His insistence on wanting to see Rissa had hooked him into the punishment cycle immediately, and through all his twelve years in Welfare he'd never worked clear of that brutal routine. He didn't even remember meeting Rissa- after the lottery had sprung her loose and she in rum bought him free-at Erika Hulzein's, where the psych-techs had put his mind into somewhat better working order. He did recall the meeting, two bio-years later on the Hidden World called Number One, when Tregare's drug hypnosis defused his mind of UET's lethal booby traps. So then he'd joined Tregare, met Use, and...

His cup was empty. Filling it, he began scanning up, in the way he'd learned at Erika's, through his life from then to now. When he reached "now," he nodded and considered the dream again-but from outside it, not inside.

Whatever his subconscious was trying to say, he couldn't make the symbolism fit.



Well, maybe the purpose was to do what he'd just done: review his entire past. But he'd found no new insights. *I could chew on this all night and get no place.*

Chew? Yes, now he noticed hunger, and nibbled slowly on some mixed-grain wafers, dunking each in his hot coffee first. Then he sat back and tried to let his thoughts float freely, toward

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whatever the dream's purpose might be. Relaxing, he almost dozed. Then a flash of violent memory brought him upright. *Why this?*

So clear, the visualization: almost as though he could scan it for details he'd missed at the time. The control room of *Graf Spec*, command ship for Falconer squadron when Tregare's fleet went from Stronghold to battle for Earth. Ilse at the controls, hell-bent for Ozzie Newhausen's UET ships. Good action, the gunners spiking targets, holding the missiles for later. Then crossfire-*the hits*-a turret blown, the beam slashing across Use's head! She sagged but her fingers moved on the board; *Spec* bucked and pulled free. Then another hit flung her sprawling to the deck; Ivan scrambled to the console and completed the ship's escape. Then heard himself yelling for the Second Hat to take over, so Ivan could go to Ilse.

The scene faded, but the rest of it he knew. Ilse dying, he thought, so only one purpose left. He called Tregare, removed *Graf Spec* from squadron command. And took that ship up the inside of Admiral Newhausen's cone formation and blew Ozzie to plasma.

And if Use hadn't come to consciousness and told him a better way to do it, Ivan fully intended to ram.

Memory ceased to grip him; he shook his head. *Why that?* Nearly half an hour he'd spent in a state close to trance; why? *It has to mean something.*

An answer came. He didn't like it, but all his pushing wouldn't make it go away. *I cling to blind impulse, and fail people.*

Maybe at age eight he had an excuse-scared and hurt, yelling at the Welfare goons and too stubborn to give up. Well, he'd paid, in years of pain and a messed-up mind. And was that mind back to "normal"? Or did he just think it was?

But his actions on *Graf Spec*, in the fighting-he tried to see them as Rissa might, or Tregare. Squadron coordination officer, a command ship's First Hat, sees his woman dying-so he pulls the ship out of pattern and goes for one-man revenge. Did he ask if the crew-nearly a hundred persons-wanted to die to avenge Ilse? No. Ivan Marchant was drunk on personal rage and desolation, so the rest of the ship could bloody well come along. And *the fleet*, Earth's fate hanging in the balance, could go hang.

The more he looked at it, the worse it got. *Tregare-what must the man think of me?* At this late-date, he could hardly ask.

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Tired, but curiously at peace, Ivan dressed and went upship. He had his answer: from now on, to put tighter rein to his fierce, sometimes berserk, impulses.

The dream had, after all, made sense.

Hungry again, he entered the galley. Rissa and Tregare sat with Anders Kobolak's wife, Alina Rostadt; Ivan filled a plate for himself and joined them. "... nearly to the point," Tregare was saying, "where a sub-light ship would be making turnover. Seems funny, not having to do the maneuver on this bucket."

"I've never understood that," Alina said, so Tregare explained how, on FTL ships, you ran most of the way on accel and then simply cut the Hoyfarul Drive, cold. Well, Ivan already knew that the excess velocity-derived mass, collapsing back into the ship's own universe, slowed it below light-speed *fast*.

"Then," Tregare added, "a few days' decel gets you down to zerch. If you've gauged your distance right, you're close to where you're going. That's the tricky part. Right, Ivan?"

"Right." Done eating, Ivan stood, took his empty tray to the disposal counter, and left the galley.

And found that Rissa had followed him. "Ivan-may we talk?"

He didn't want to, but paused while she caught up. "What about?"

"Whatever concerns you. Obviously, something does."

It was odd, he thought, that their childhood rapport had survived so strongly. After all, the Welfare system had separated them quite young-and then each had lived roughly thirteen bio-years until their next real meeting. During those years which had nearly crushed his own mind, Rissa's had been toughened instead. Disparate experience ...



And yet, once they were together again, the reacquaintance took little time and the old bond of feeling grew as strong as ever. Often Rissa seemed to know what he was thinking before he said it. And sometimes this apparent link was comforting. Right now, though, he found it more of a nuisance. He'd already done his sorting of memories, his reevaluations; he didn't *want* to hash through them all over again. Not now, anyway.

So he answered, "Trouble sleeping, is all. I'll catch up; I always do." Because she was wearing her worried look, he added, "Rissa-unless you have a time machine in your back pocket, to change the past, leave this one to me. I can handle it."

She frowned, but said no more.

VI. Lisele

As long as everyone else practiced gunnery an hour at a time, so did Liesel Selene—even though after fifteen or twenty minutes she got tired and her scores dropped. But when Tregare announced that the contest would be run in ten-minute heats, she changed to fifteen-minute sessions, with rests between.

Her average scores took a quantum jump. Now, two days before the shootout, she entered a sixty-three in the log-and pouted slightly, because it wasn't the best she'd done. Well, maybe on the last day of practice she could get in some extra time.

She was due back in quarters now, to take charge of baby Renalle when their mother went on watch. And while the infant slept, Lisele could get on with her studies. Checking to see that she was leaving the turret in good order, she turned and skipped down to the next level. Seeing grownups there, she slowed down and walked, but as soon as she was out of their sight she went back to a faster and less regular way of moving. Coming to the last stairs she drew a deep breath—could she take this Sight *all* the way, three at a time? She launched herself and timed her leaps, and it was going fine—and then, below, someone entered from the side and started up to meet her. Lisele grabbed the handrail and stopped her plunge. "Oh, peace!"

"Lisele—are you all right?" It was Dacia, scrambling up toward her. Lisele caught her balance, and stood.

"Oh, sure." Dacia was good fun; she wouldn't scold. "I was trying threesies, was all, and didn't expect you."

Dacia snorted. "Not a very good place for it; this flight's blind at the bottom. Why not save threesies for farther downship, where there's openwork and you can see people coming?"

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It made sense; Lisele nodded. "Sure. Thanks, Dacia." The woman patted her thin shoulder and went on up. Her dare-and-do mood broken, Lisele took the rest of the stairs one at a time, only clattering a little extra to make it sound better.

In quarters, Rissa had put the baby down to sleep and was ready to go on watch. She kissed Lisele and said, "If you have not eaten lately, Tregare stocked the coldbox this morning. And Ellalee will be here as usual, to relieve you at nineteen-hundred. Now—do you have any news for me?"

"Well, I'm doing better on the turrets." She recited her latest scores.

Rissa nodded. "Working in shorter periods, yes. Perhaps you will help Dacia's team win over mine." She laughed, and hugged the child. "If you do, I shall be most proud of you." Then she picked up her watch-officer's gear, and left.

Lisele went over to Renalle, saw that the infant wasn't asleep yet, and reached down to pat her cheek. She was growing, no doubt about that. Tregare claimed she was due to sprout teeth, but Rissa said he was thinking ahead of schedule. Still—gently, Lisele intruded a fingertip and felt along the baby's gums. There *was* something there....

Renalle was clearly sleepy; time to leave her alone, and the next couple of hours would be a good time for Lisele to study. She got out her materials and sat at her mother's desk.

What did she most need to catch up on? She sighed; the calculus, probably. Not that she disliked math, but her project for Prof Diebolt had gotten so interesting that she'd skimmed on the calc. By habit, she set out the filmtape unit and turned her calculator on; then she looked at the lesson assignment and put both units away. Because for the next three sections, Old Numberhead wanted everybody to practice



using the older methods-books, sliderules, even the function-tables on paper. "Your math is no good to you," Old Numbers liked to say, "if a dead battery can put it out of business."

Lisele could see his point-but a few minutes later, frowning over a page of log-trig functions, she wished she didn't have to. Then she remembered how to follow his instructions, finally located the log-secant of 2.377 radians, and finished the problem. Well and good, as the old prof liked to say.

When she had worked through the first section, she felt hungry, and closed the books. As she fixed a snack for herself, her mind was still on the math. Differential-calc was clear

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enough; it made sense and you could work it out for yourself. Integral, though-using differentials instead of derivatives- well, she could see that it worked, when you looked at the tables and plugged values in, but how had anyone ever come up with those solutions in the first place?

The heck with it. She put more pickles and cheese on her sandwich, poured some fruit juice, and ate.

She'd finished the calc and a chapter of post-UET economics, and given the suddenly restive baby her bottle, when her relief sitter arrived. "Hi, Ellalee! I've just fed Renalle."

"That's good, Lisele. How are you?" Ellalee Ganelong's smile showed large white teeth against brown skin. Ellalee was Australian, half aborigine, with oddly heavy features. Maybe it was her pleasantness, Lisele thought, that made her seem pretty. But Rissa said she really was, in her own way.

"Studying hard tonight, have you been?" she said now. At Lisele's gesture toward the sandwich fixings, Ellalee shook her head, curly hair jiggling with the move. "I ate at midwatch. Heaps." She had a quick look at Renalle, then sat. Lisele seated herself again at Rissa's desk, and they talked. Ellalee was training for Drive-tech First, about halfway through the procedures that dealt with fine-tuning and lock control circuits. The funny part, Lisele thought, was that new drive-techs began by working with the heaviest power stages, because those controls weren't at all delicate, so it was hard to make any serious mistake. That job carried a Third rating, which Ellalee had held when the *Deux* lifted. And now going for First. Not bad!

Ellalee had a little driverroom gossip about her boss, Chief Engineer Hagen Trent. A little too fussy, Lisele had heard Tregare say of the man. Ellalee's opinion was: "No experience at being *boss*, I think-except in a lab, perhaps. But he's come quite patient now, unless someone makes the same mistake twice." She grinned. "Then he gets red and rubs knuckles in what hair he has left, and talks too fast. Not so often now, though." Imagining Trent that way, Lisele had to laugh.

Midway, the laugh turned to yawn. Ellalee said, "Long day?"

"Mmm-sort of." Lisele could, she decided, put her books away tomorrow.

"Think I'll go to bed. Good night."

"Yes. Sleep comfy."

In her tiny bedroom and undressed, Lisele felt restless. Biofeedback, maybe? She hadn't used-it much lately. Activating

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the machine, she plumped down on the mat and began the breathing exercises. Soon her mind floated, relaxed; she lost track of time.

When the machine turned off, its soft chime brought her awake enough to get into bed. But not awake for long.

Coming out of sleep, Lisele lay quietly and listened. Her chronometer indicated time for breakfast, so-considering the watch schedules, Rissa and perhaps Tregare should be here, and Ellalee gone. She got up, chose clothing, and went to see.

In the common room, nobody home. Probably in their bedroom, her parents. At this hour, awake and making love, maybe, or talking afterward. At school she'd seen holotapes about sex; it looked pretty funny but people seemed to enjoy it. Just as well, she thought, or maybe she wouldn't be here!

Renalle would, though; the parthenogenetic Hulzein process needed no man. Stowing study materials away, Lisele thought about her sister. Half-sister, really, and no kin to Tregare, at all-but he acted as if the baby were his own blood. Lisele



sighed; she sure had a nice family!

Listening at the main bedroom's door, she heard nothing. Still asleep, maybe? So she wrote on the bulletin pad:

Have gone to breakfast. Last night caught up to sked on Calc and Econ. I bet my team (Dacia's) beats yours both! But what can we bet?

Lisele

Outside quarters, door closed softly, she charged up the stairs as fast as she could go. At the galley level, panting, she waited and walked slowly, to be breathing easily when she entered. At the door she paused and looked around. Arlen Limmer was sitting with the blonde, Jenise Rorvik. So Lisele filled a tray and went to a corner table, by herself. While she ate, she thought about Arlen.

On Stronghold as little kids, they'd been together all the time-like brother and sister, maybe even twins. She'd *loved* Arlen, and had missed him ever since. On Earth, other kids were all right, but not the same. Sometimes she'd pretend Arlen was with her, and tell him all her thoughts. She *knew* it was silly ...

Then when the Limmers came to Earth, Lisele was thrilled. Because now she was a big girl, close to nine bio-years, and Arlen would be her best friend again, and maybe someday they'd get married or something. The details hadn't worried her.

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Except that living slow on groundside while Tregare's fleet, coming to Earth, chewed time, Arlen was already grown up tall. And Lisele wasn't. So now he sat and smiled at that old harpy-at least *twenty*, she had to be-Jenise Rorvik, with her bright blonde hair that most likely wasn't even natural!

Wondering how she herself might look as a blonde, Lisele shrugged; Rissa probably wouldn't let her try it. Well, what else? How about the woman in the old filmtaped novel she'd scanned last month? So hopelessly in love that she wasn't even *eating*. Silly-but maybe not a bad idea for getting somebody's attention. Except, how could anyone do it with a straight face?

And besides, Lisele had already cleaned her tray.

Well, on her way out she'd say hello to Arlen; after all, she did still like him. But it wasn't fair, him grown up and her not.

The saying hello didn't work too well. Rorvik was smiling and friendly, and did most of the talking. Everything Lisele tried to say sounded more and more like a little kid, and she couldn't get the conversation off the subject of the gunnery match. Finally she saw Rissa and Tregare come in, and got away to talk with them a moment. Tregare gave her a hug, and a compliment on her studying; Rissa was glad her daughter wasn't skimping the biofeedback routines. But it seemed clear that both had other things on their minds, so Lisele went up to Turret Six for a practice run. It went well, and she headed downship again.

Approaching a landing, she saw Dacia Kobolak come out of Uncle Ivan's quarters, and waved to her. "Hi, Dacia!"

"Hi." Lisele wanted to talk, but Dacia hurried on past, so maybe this wasn't the time for it. Oh, well-she went on down to captain's digs; she needed a shower, anyway.

Drying herself, she stood before a mirror. When it came to looking grownup, she was pretty hopeless. Skinny like a boy, no butt to notice, no body fur at all, yet. It wasn't as if she was even interested in any sex stuff, at her age and with no real idea how people were supposed to *feel* about it-but it'd be nice if she *looked* like some competition for oi' Rorvik!

Squinting sidewise at the mirror, she squeezed the flesh around one pale nipple, to try to make a bulge. It didn't look like much of anything, and when she let go, right away it went flat again. Heck with it. She put the towel away and got dressed. Still thinking, though: in the old novel the woman was "flat-chested" and padded herself to look bigger there. Why? She was grown-up and functional; what difference did *sizes* make?

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Anyway, if Lisele herself rigged stuff under her clothes to show up with her chest sticking out, who'd believe it? They'd just laugh and want to know what the joke was.

And then she'd be stuck. Because there wasn't any joke.

Later that day, Lisele managed two more practice sessions in the gunnery turrets.



Then she sat with Renalle and covered the day's studies, did some biofeedback and went to bed early. When she woke, she felt up to tackling Ozzie Newhausen his own damn self!

Showered, dressed in her sloppiest and most comfortable jumpsuit, Lisele made a light breakfast. Full stomachs didn't go too well with competition. Climbing sedately to the turret deck, she found a crowd there-what Ellalee would call "a fair jam." The whole crew-except, Lisele supposed, for a skeleton watch.

Looking for her team captain, she found Dacia talking with Hagen Trent and Hask Ornoway. A visored cap made the balding Trent look a lot younger. Dacia greeted Lisele with a quick, one-armed hug. "For our team, you and Hask drew first round. All right?" Dacia was certainly sitting on lots of excitement.

"Sure." Why wait around? "When do we start?"

"Not long now," said Ornoway, grinning at her. So they waited for their assigned monitors to arrive-someone from another team, to observe and help keep score. And maybe, Lisele thought, have something to do while they waited for their own turns. Anyway, she'd drawn Anders Kobolak, and here he came. They greeted; then over the speaker Jeremy Crowfoot gave a quick recap of the rules. As he finished, Lisele turned to leave.

"Wait," said Dacia, and held out a small, firm cushion. "Here. Try sitting on this; it may help your reach."

Lisele took it. "Sure. . .thanks." But why now, with no time to practice and get used to it? Oh, well-it might help. And in the gunner's seat of Turret Six she found the cushion did give her a more comfortable angle on the control levers. So with the console's function switch on Test she applied power and confirmed that her controls were working: left hand on range lights and the other on her heterodyne loop. Returning the levers to neutral she switched function to Simulation; lights and screen image went dark. Her hands weren't sweaty; it was out of habit that she rubbed them on her jumpsuit. "Ready." Facing her, sitting where he couldn't see the indicators to get any possible

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clues for his own turn, Anders Kobolak nodded. He'd call her scores after each run; she wouldn't have to look.

Then Crowfoot began his countdown, and it all started.

First run came straight and closed slowly. *Nothing like making easy points, while I can.* Next one had a swerve at the middle, but she caught it fast and scored seventy-five. Then a skew pass and an abrupt change of target: that's where fast reflexes came in handy! "Fifty-eight."

It kept on; the ten minutes felt like thirty. Not physical fatigue, though; the cushion did help. And when the eight-run sequence ended, her overall score was sixty-seven.

"Nice going, there," said Anders Koboik, and they went out to the deck, to check team standings. And found that Lisele and Ornoway had given Dacia's group a slight initial lead. "Now if the rest of us can do as well-," Dacia said, and Lisele felt good.

Ornoway touched her shoulder. "Quick galley break, partner?"

Lisele considered. Twenty minutes, before she was due to monitor Rostadt. "Sure. *Real* fast, though." Their pace downship could have cost them a few safety demerits if Tregare bothered with such things. Ornoway had coffee while Lisele sipped fruit juice, and they did get back on time.

Monitor work, except for watching Alina's concentration and reactions, was dull. All Lisele could see was the numbers. Final rating, overall, was sixty-two.

Mostly by Dacia's own skill, this set of runs helped her team's lead. Then Ivan's shooting put his own group ahead, and the first round was over.

Lisele's second session brought harder runs; she got a fifty-nine total, and Rissa had brought her own team close to Ivan's. "Dacia, we're behind!" Lisele hadn't expected to be so anxious, but found herself sweating. "We have to work!"

"Sure." Dacia nodded. "But so does everyone else." At the end of round two, Rissa led and Dacia came second. A novice on Ivan's team had panicked and jammed the override pedal down for most of his turn, cutting his hits to half-value.

Then Lisele got a bad run; a simulated hit crippled her "ship's" drive and left her drifting, and she didn't adjust quickly enough. A humiliating twenty-seven for the run, and forty-nine for the round, overall. Avoiding Dacia and everyone else, she



wandered a lower deck where she wouldn't have to talk with

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anyone. Maybe when this was all done with, she'd just lock herself in her bedroom and stay there!

In her bedroom! There wasn't time to go down there before she was due to monitor Alina's round, but she stepped into a utilities locker, closed the door, and sat, breathing the way she should, paying attention to how she felt. With her eyes shut she could almost visualize the indicators of the absent biofeedback machine. She knew how much time she had, and she used it all, emerging with enough to spare so that she could reach her monitoring assignment without haste.

Alina scored well, and then Lisele found a nearer haven to use her next free time for further exercises in relaxation. As she headed, then, back to Turret Six, Dacia called to her. "Lisele! How are you feeling? I haven't seen you..."

The child grinned. "Best I've been all day." And when her first run began, she moved with confidence. It worked; she had a good fourth round, and her fifth wasn't bad, either. The final, though, was where she'd give it all she had!

Of course Crowfoot had saved his trickiest stuff for that one-but it was the same for everybody, wasn't it? So Lisele tried to balance concentration with relaxing, and while a few fast changes caught her by surprise, they didn't fluster her now.

At the end, Anders whistled. "Forty-seven. Jeremy was figuring nobody would do much better than forty on this series."

Lisele shrugged. "Rissa will, I expect. And Ivan, and Dacia. But whoever does what, I did the best I could." And found herself grinning. Later, watching Alina freeze on a tricky change and drop points, Lisele felt only sympathy, not gloating.

The end of action brought a letdown and a return of tension. Not even wanting to check team standings until final results were in, Lisele went to the galley-and suddenly found that her appetite had merely been lying in wait. She was finishing a second helping, and refilling her glass of synthetic milk, when the last group of contestants and monitors straggled in. Nervous now, as Jeremy Crowfoot began to announce the tournament results, she tried to keep her breathing slow and even.

Crowfoot didn't keep anybody in suspense. The ship's top five gunners, in order, were Ivan with an overall sixty-two, Rissa, Dacia, Anders Kobolak and Hask Ornoway. Rissa's team had won, with Dacia's second and Ivan's trailing. But all Lisele noticed was that Rissa won by less than twenty points-*if only I hadn't blown up in the third round!*

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Tears wet her eyes; she couldn't look at Dacia, sitting next to her. But the woman squeezed her hand, and whispered, "Check the printouts. Nearly everyone had at least one bad round."

Jererny still talked. "-novice category, placing seventh and ninth overall with scores of fifty-five and fifty-two. So a reasonable amount of cheering is in order, for Liesel Selene Moray and Jenise Rorvik."

Through the clapping, someone yelled "Speech!" Lisele shook her head; her throat wouldn't work. Finally, to Dacia, she choked out, "Tell 'em thanks," and Dacia did.

Then it was all right, except that someone had poured her empty milk glass full of wine. Sure, she'd had wine at dinner sometimes, but not *this* much. She looked across to where Tregare was sitting, caught his gaze, and touched the glass. Smiling, with thumb and forefinger he measured a vertical space.

About three centimeters. So over the next half hour, before the gathering broke up, that's how much she drank.

And left the rest of it.

Nothing was really wrong with her balance but it felt funny, so she walked slower than usual. Wine, she knew, was like that. Entering quarters she had a question on her mind, so she asked her parents, right out. "Up there, people acting like my shooting was the best thing since Uncle Ivan got Ozzie Newhausen. I know that's not real. How much is?"

Rissa put down her hairbrush and gave a hug. "You did very well. Not as well as some, or as you will do in future. The contest was a thorough success, so there will be more of them."

"I'm pretty good but I'm not wonderful?"



Tregare's special huff-and-puff hug should have crushed her, but somehow never did. "You're wonderful, all right, small potatoes. Not just your placing well; I saw your heat records, too. Partway through, you ran into trouble. Then you fought back and beat clear of it." He grinned. "That's what's wonderful."

All right; she could believe it. Going to her bedroom, she wondered if she needed the feedback machine. No, her mind felt just the way it ought to. She lay down and thought through her day, and never knew when thinking stopped and sleep began.

With gunnery off her mind for a while, Lisele spent more time studying. Another thing bothered her, though, and one day

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when she found Arlen Limmer sitting alone in the galley, she went and sat facing him. "Hi." She didn't know where Jenise Rorvik was and she didn't ask. "Hi, Arlen."

Mouth full, chewing, he nodded. And now, thinking of what she'd planned to say, it all sounded stupid to her. Still, here was her chance and she wasn't going to waste it. "Arlen-you remember back at Stronghold, when we were little?"

"Sure. Long time ago-for me, anyway. Why?"

She looked at him, nearly a man while she was only a child. "You were my best friend. I *loved* you. But now-"

His fork slapped down; food splattered, and he grabbed a napkin-tissue to wipe his tunic. "You keep acting as if it's *my* fault. When we came to Earth I really wanted to see you-I didn't think of you still being a little kid. All that about relativity and time-chewing-I knew it, but it didn't *register*." He looked as if maybe it hurt him, too, but his hurt didn't help hers any. She waited, and he said, "I'd even dreamed about you."

"You did? Dreamed what?" He shook his head. But he was on the run now, some way, so she said, "Just a dream-you can tell me."

His face had got awfully red. "Well-we were grownup and liked each other, and maybe we even got married." His glare hardly looked friendly, let alone loving. "But don't you tell anybody! Because now it's silly."

"I won't tell. But what's silly about it? I won't be a kid all my life; someday I'll be your age. Ever think of that?"

Her own words surprised her; Arlen's hands seemed to push at them, and he looked as if he'd swallowed the wrong way. "That's stupid. When you're my age I'll be nearly as old as your *mother*."

To Lisele, numbers were easy. She said, "You have nine years on me. Tregare has the same on Rissa. Doesn't seem to bother them."

Taking a deep breath she waited again, but Arlen shook his head and said nothing. All right, then! She stood. "I thought- but I don't *need* you!" She turned and ran out of the galley. Going downship she did threesies all the way and didn't miss once.

Feeling embarrassed, for the next few days she stayed clear of Arlen; the one time he tried to talk with her, she wouldn't answer. Then the new tourney took up her attention, and Dacia's team came in only eight points behind Rissa's. And in the third

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shootout Lisele made her best six-round score ever, and Dacia's team notched its first win. With that kind of action, who had time to think about Arlen Limmer?

One day when Lisele went with Tregare up to Control, all the outside sensors were working again! Tregare stopped cold. "Who the hell cut us below light? And why?"

"It's simulations, Tregare!" So Tregare cooled down, as Jeremy Crowfoot explained: the gunnery tourneys had given him the idea to rig some tapes for navigation training. "Above light, we've been stymied on that. So-"

"Sure." Tregare grinned now. "You could have told me, though; i practically had heart failure."

"Didn't want to bother you until I had the bugs out. Want to try it?" So Tregare took a control seat, and Crowfoot moved some switches. The screen showed a moving star field, and Lisele watched as one star, growing brighter, moved into the ship's path-though of course it would be the *ship* moving. Tregare punched a course change; the screen reflected the move. Other situations appeared, a lot closer together in time than could really happen. Sometimes Lisele saw what the problem was, but usually not.

After a few minutes, Tregare shut off the input. "Good job, Jere. You just earned



yourself a bonus."

Headshake. "I don't need one. It was something to *do*."

"So's my giving you the bonus, so don't argue."

Before her father could get involved in his routine watch-log scan, Lisele asked, "Is that just for real navigators, or could I practice on it, too? Like with gunnery?"

Tregare looked at her, then toward Crowfoot. "If it's all right with you, Jere, let's announce that the facility's open to anyone who wants to learn. Nothing wrong with people knowing more jobs than one or two." Lisele got a quick hug. "You, now-you'll run a ship of your own someday, or I miss my guess. So you might's well start learning for it."

The simulations got only a few days' usage, though, because one evening, the whole family dining together in quarters for once, Tregare announced, "In about six hours we cut the Hoyfarul Drive and drop below light. I might as well stay up for the show; short naps never do me much good."

Lisele did nap, until Rissa woke her to go upship. In Control all the Hats were present-Rissa, Anders, Ornavay-as well as Crowfoot standing over the computer monitor and Jenise

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Rorvik on the comm board. After a short wait that seemed longer, over the intercom Hagen Trent said, "Ready, down here. Give me the count?"

"Sure," and Tregare began it. This early, he didn't hesitate to interrupt with comment and advice. "Seconds four-twenty; mark. Now, Hagen-I'll tell you when we pass C going south, but don't turn ship for decel until I give you the office. Right?"

"Understood, Tregare." The count went on. At "Now!" came a pause, a second of nothing happening. Then the whole ship lurched, a shudder without sound, and yet Lisele's ears hurt. All the screens and indicators came alive-and this time, no simulation!

Tregare yelled. "Rorvik! Swing your input grids. Those blips-six? seven?-just going offscreen. What the hell *are* they?"

Jenise probably did her best-and like her or not, Lisele did admit she was competent-but the blips showed only briefly and wavering, and then were gone.

Lisele couldn't hear Tregare's muffled words, but by the look of him she knew he was swearing a blue streak. Then he said, "Those were ships; the speeds are right and they changed course. Whatever, they got away." He grinned. "Or maybe *we* got away. All right, Hagen; turn ship, and I'll feed you decel figures for Shaarbant." Lisele knew to stay strapped in during the zero-gee of turnover, but it sure *felt* funny. Then Tregare said, "Decel, point-six-seven of max. Should put us not quite four days from here to Shaarbant." A pause. "Make that four days on the nose, near as makes no difference. Because I'm aiming to hit orbital drift speed and go synchronous around that planet."

"You do not," said Rissa, "plan to land immediately?"

"Course not. Think about it-the odds are that this Shrakken colony never heard of Earth or humans. When they see we're not their own, likely they'd take us for *Tsa*, and-"

Rissa nodded. "Yes, I see. To our knowledge, only three Shrakken ships have had contact with our species. UET's Committee Police murdered the first's crew and took the ship." Counting by fingers, she moved her touch to a second. "Then Stonzai's *Sharanj* visited the Charleyhorse colony before going to Number One where you captured it."

Both those ships, Lisele knew, were now at Stronghold, for Tregare had sent Stonzai and her crew home with a UET ship and its superior armament, as a goodwill gesture. Where that

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ship had actually gone, no one on the *Deux* had any idea, for Stonzai had at a later time transshipped in space to a Shrakken ship. And then, in a chance meeting with Derek Limmer's FTL ship *Leapfrog*, just after Limmer cut drive to sub-light, received the guiding directions that took Stonzai to Earth. Or at least that was the way Rissa was telling it. It sounded right.

Dacia Kobolak had joined the group; Tregare turned to her. "Just saying we'll need to orbit awhile and exchange hails with Shaarbant, before it'd be safe to land. Stonzai and the other Shrakken: how *Song* you think it'll take to get 'em up and around again?"



Dacia cleared her throat. "Eight hours or less. But you know Stonzai's problem. How long do you plan to stay in orbit?" Tregare scowled; looking uneasy, Dacia raised her voice. "Stonzai will be in the throes of the Shrakken compulsion to ovulate. How long, while we orbit, will she have to suffer it?"

Tregare shrugged. "Depends. On how long it takes her to talk the locals into letting us sit down peaceably." No one answered him. "Figure on having Stonzai awake and making sense when we're three-four hours short of making orbit. That's close enough to talk good, and sooner she gets contact, the sooner we can set her down safe."

Dacia's voice had an edge to it. "Our mission certainly depends on a lot of short-term considerations, doesn't it? And unplanned ones, at that."

Lisele saw Tregare change his mind and not get mad. "You've got a point, Dacia-and if you or I had designed the Shrakken biology, you might have a good one." Dacia's own scowl came and went, before Tregare said, "As is, though, we'll just play the cards we're dealt."

When Trent got his decel steady, the extra people relinquished Control to its regular watch crew. Lisele left her parents talking with others and went to quarters. There she had a snack, and took time for a brief biofeedback session before going to bed.

Before sleeping, her last thought was that she would be one of the first humans ever to land on a Shrakken world.

VII Elzh

Behind, now, lay the charted mindbeast planet. No close Hearing had the seven ships made; when the most sensitive of the crewing felt mindpain, Elzh pulled back to study the beastworld at safe remove.

Beast minds never gave stillness; always and always came the fierce harsh jangling that brought pain and threatened madness. Tsa, unless mindsaying, always granted each other quiet. That these creatures did not, was what made them beasts. And never any answer to Tsa pleas, any notice of Tsa needs and Tsa pain.

So in grouping, mindsaying, Elzh decided. *The beasts die.* No Tsa protested; all thought was to end this beastworld, to put it behind and go toward the next-long far ahead, not soon-on the Tsa-Drin chart. As understood.

But now, of a sudden, a new thing-out of *nothing*, came a mindbeast ship. Not coming from distance, shown ahead by screen Winkings, as correct, as always, but impossibly there *now*. First and before, it was *not*; then it was. No nearing, as ships rightly did. And then gone turning to side, as Elzh turned also-away, it went, much soon, toward the mindbeast world. Too distant for mindpain, it had been, but not by great margin. A new thing; more dread?

To learn, the Tsa way-always to learn. But also to obey. Elzh thought, not yet mindsaying to any, and then decided. *Two ships go now, on to fulfill the Tsa-Drin plan. The rest stay, until we solve the riddle of the ship that came from nothing.* Elzh chose, then, the two ships to go, and sent the thoughts for parting, and waited in quiet while parting became done. As correct, as understood.

Other thoughts disturbed quiet; in fret, Elzh tried to keep

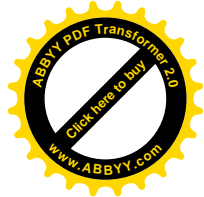
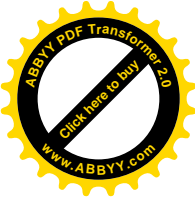
correct mind. But how, all indling together, could Idsath as moderator forget the Tsa-Drin directive and return blended genes to Tserln, as female, to give young? Yet it was happened, and without death of Tserln, could not erase. Tsa-Drin or no, once begun, the young would be. Fastly it had grown, in the Tsa way, and Tserln gave it quite timely, and put about it the name Ceevt, for all Tsa to know. A good young, thought Elzh, with tiny mind-touch soft like blowing dust. But the Tsa-Drin-not to obey, this was.

Parting ended. Mindsaying to the remaining ships, Elzh set them to look for the ship from nothing.

Not on screen Winkings at all now, so too far to give mindpain. And back toward beastworld it had to be, because nowhere else. Mindsaying, Elzh turned the five ships.

Five Tsa ships and one beast ship. Yes. Dread, though, even so-for how does a ship appear from nothing? But with mindbeasts, no mercy-given or expected. Only dread and pain and death.

But for Tsa, to obey. *To the beastworld .. .yes.*



VIII. Rissa

Recovering from freeze, Stonzai took longer than Dacia Kobolak had predicted. Less than an hour short of injecting *Inconnu Deux* into synchronous orbit, juggling deceleration to give maneuverability if he needed it, Tregare showed his impatience. "Rissa-if Dacia doesn't get that overgrown woggle-bug up here pretty soon, we could be in trouble."

Standing behind the control seat, Rissa clasped his shoulder. "She knows that, Bran. And is, I am sure, working as rapidly as possible." Feeling the tension in him, she said, "If you like, I will visit the recovery compartment and report back to you. But you do *not* want to call again and interrupt her efforts."

"Right; go ahead." So Rissa left the control room and went downship. Halfway to her destination she felt the ship lurch, and

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barely caught herself from losing balance on the stairs. "All hands!" Tregare's voice; all-ship broadcast? "Shrakken ships rising from the planet. Took off from farside, I guess; coming fast, anyway. Get strapped down-or braced, at least-for maneuvering."

But Rissa had no time for precaution. Plunging down the stairs, one level and then the next, catching herself by grabbing handrail at each jump, she reached the room she sought. And a bit short of breath, went inside.

She looked. Stonzai, sitting upright, seemed alert; Dacia was feeding her. No sign of Sevshen, the other Shrakken. "Dacia! Is Stonzai ready to talk with her people? Because they have sent ships up, coming at us."

Dacia looked confused. "I think so. But getting her up to Control, with the ship bouncing this way-" For again the *Deux* had bucked.

What to do? / *must decide quickly, for no one else will.* Then she had her answer. "Dacia-down the corridor and across it-three doors along, I believe. A study room with an extension viewscreen." She turned to go there. "Bring Stonzai, and hurry! I will call Tregare, so that he can make the circuit arrangements."

Now she ran. The door she chose was the correct one, and as she had thought, it was not locked. She turned the lights on and looked around. The place was dusty, but that didn't matter. She activated the screen; it lit, but had no input signal. She hit the intercom switch.

"Tregare! I am in E-14. Connect its screen, two-way communication and of course you will interpose a hold circuit, to your offship channels. Stonzai will be here, to talk; Dacia says she is ready, but there is no time to-"

"Yeah, yeah-I get it, and thanks." Abruptly, half the screen showed Tregare, with Ivan and Mask Ornavay alongside him. The other half flickered; then Shaarbant, the planet ahead, appeared.

Behind her, Rissa heard sounds. She turned; Dacia came in, supporting Stonzai, both moving slowly. Rissa shifted chairs to give them all good position before the screen. A chair would not suit the Shrakken but on short notice it was the best Rissa could do, and Stonzai settled into it without complaint.

The screen had to be working both ways, because Tregare said, "Stonzai-we're near Shaarbant and your people are shooting ships up at us. You have to tell 'em we're here to be friends. I'm trying to get tuned for direct talk. Are you ready to help?"

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Bewildered-seeming, Stonzai turned to Rissa. "Help, I would-but what is it he say, that to do I must?" Quickly, Rissa paraphrased Tregare's words, and looking to the screen, Stonzai said, "Yes. To Shrakken here, talk I will."

"Good," and Tregare's voice tone and angle of grin were as Rissa remembered, from the old fighting days. "We have speed on those ships," he said next, "and accel advantage. Come to crunch we could dodge, not have to shoot. But seems to me, running would set one lousy precedent. Better than shooting, but not by much."

On half the viewscreen, Shaarbant vanished and the image of two Shrakken appeared. One spoke and Stonzai answered, both speaking at length, and Rissa understood none of it. But then Stonzai turned aside to her and said, "That you are here to aid, I have told."

And a time later, after more talk, Tregare dispensed with orbital maneuvers and



landed directly on Shaarbant-between two Shrakken ships, on a bare clearing at the junction of two rivers. The time of day, there, was not long past dawn.

Spaceport facilities, Rissa noted, were crude and of recent construction-but adequate. "Tregare-it seems we have accomplished the first of our mission."

"Sure. As long as Stonzai stays healthy, to interpret."

Sevshen's recovery was slower than Stonzai's. At a coffee break with Rissa, Dacia Kobolak shook her head. "The Shrakken metabolism-we simply don't know enough about it. We're lucky I didn't kill both of them by mistake." "Where are they now?" said Liesel Selene.

"In their quarters," Rissa said. "Groundside, with host animals available for the resulting larvae, Stonzai can now safely ovulate and breed."

Lisele frowned. "I know a little about that. Tell me the rest."

Rissa explained. She had never seen Shrakken breed, but from Stonzai she knew the mechanics of it. The female ovipositor, which humans had first thought to be a male organ, entered the male's body and withdrew the sperm. The fertilized ovum- ovoid, about three centimeters long and two across-sprouted short tentacles and entered a larva! phase. And at that stage a host animal was needed-for by fierce, uncontrollable instinct the female would seize on *any* available organism, even another Shrakken, and paralyze it with a naturally-produced "zombie

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gas" and implant the voracious larvae. If she failed to do so, they would be her own death, instead.

Because, similar to the digger wasps of Earth, the larvae fed on their living hosts. Living and paralyzed, but not beyond feeling pain. Rissa knew that part of it first-hand; luckily, when the Shrakken female on the planet Number Oee had implanted her, a doctor had removed the larval parasite before it had time to attach itself to her tissues and begin to feed.

At this point, Lisele shuddered. "I didn't know it was *that* bad. What terrible creatures!"

"No," said Rissa. "Not so terrible. It is simply their biology, set by evolution, over which they have no control."

"But every time there's a new Shrakken, something has to die!" Grimacing, the child shook her head.

"Lisele," her mother said. "We are not vegetarians, are we? Nearly every time we eat a *meal*, some creature has died to provide part of it."

"But-"

"Adult Shrakken, Lisele, are largely vegetarian."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I merely wished to put the matter into perspective."

When the two Shrakken left the ship-hurriedly, for there was no time to waste-Tregare and Ivan escorted them. Rissa cut short her cuddling with baby Renalle, and went to Control. "You'll have command," Tregare said. "I think we're all right here, but just in case..."

"Yes. If need be, I lift ship and follow our contingent plans. Bran-be careful."

"Sure." A quick hug, and he left.

Waiting, Rissa had both tension and boredom to fight; the two hours, while Tregare and Ivan were gone, seemed much longer. When her screen showed the two approaching without escort, she sighed in relief. To the watch crew, and via intercom to ramp guards and turret gunners, she said, "Terminate special alert; return to normal alert procedures." Then, to Hask Ornoway, "Your watch, Third Hat." He nodded, and she went to meet her husband and brother.

Halfway downship she saw them coming. Tregare waved. "Let's talk in the galley," so she turned and climbed back, and went in. She poured herself tea; in a few moments Ivan brought coffee and joined her; Tregare found a beer and sat also. "Stonzai deposited her young, all right, and then we got down to

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cases with the locals. If Stonzai's translations are accurate, we're in good here."

Ivan filled in. "Our staled intentions, plus delivering Stonzai and Sevshen in good shape, rate us a full refueling. As soon as their noon crew comes on duty. Then Stonzai's coming back here to brief us on this world."



Rissa nodded. "Good. And what else has been decided?" Frowning, Tregare sipped from his glass. "This port can't work directly with Hoyfarul's specs; it doesn't have facilities to build a groundcar, let alone rig a ship for FTL. There's a bigger installation, farside, that might be able to do the job. But the local admiral-well, 'he who speaks for Shaarbant', as Stonzai puts it-can't be sure. We'll have to go there and find out." "And if not?" Rissa's brows were raised. Tregare shrugged. "Then we go on to Stenevo, after all- which is a trip I'd been hoping we could bypass."

Rissa suppressed her frown. "There is no nearer world, where the Shrakken have adequate means? One would expect their technology to be better distributed." Ivan said, "It is. But not up-arm, *this* direction." "Then if that is the case," said Rissa, "we go to Stenevo." "Yes, I guess we will." Her brother, Rissa thought, did not seem especially happy at the prospect.

Local time was still well before noon. Lisele wanted to go groundside and look around; Rissa could see no reason against taking the child offship for a bit of reconnaissance, and Ellalee was also interested: "Stretch me legs some; it's been a while." Dacia was due for watch soon and had to beg off, so the three disembarked into warmish, sunny weather. An early morning haze had largely cleared but still kept the sky more pale than blue.

As they reached the ramp's foot, Rissa paused to look. The port's buildings weren't all that noteworthy; she saw wood and metal and concrete-or its equivalent, and plastic. The one noticeable difference from human architecture was that the Shrakken-built walls sloped slightly inward, not vertically. And so by the laws of proportion their doors and windows also tended to have a slight taper. As to colors, apparently the Shrakken had diverse tastes. Rissa found a few buildings, largely in tints of blue-green and reddish-orange, very much to her liking; others in drab shades reminded her all too strongly of UET and its Total Welfare centers.

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The few Shrakken walking near *Inconnu Deux* and the groundside party's path of march either ignored the humans or made the Shrakken headbob that was neither nod nor shake, and gave a brief curved wave of long fingers. Friendly enough, Rissa decided; whoever had charge of this place must have spread the information about the *Deux* both well and fast. *This is good*, she thought, seeing Shrakken stride on their long toes.

Lisele pulled at Rissa's hand. "Let's get out of the port; it's just about like any other, isn't it? Let's go see where they *live*." Well, why not? Keeping in mind not to intrude, of course. So she turned with the child's pull, and they left the port area by the shortest route.

Outside it stood a random scatter of buildings, varying in size but mostly of one or two stories; a few of the larger ones had little third-floor penthouses atop them. As with the port structures, walls were slanting, not vertical. Among and between these structures, occasionally Shrakken moved, presumably on their own errands, wearing pouch-hung harnesses similar to those used by Stonzai and Sevshen. Remembering back to the information Stonzai had given her, both verbally and on tape, Rissa said, "They tend toward communal living groups. Within those groups, some pair monogamously and others do not. They-"

Lisele spoke. "Why aren't there any children?"

"A working base, this might be," Ellalee said, "with no provisions for the young." She shrugged. "Like a camp for miners or loggers, on Earth."

"If there were children here," said Rissa, "they would be cared for by whatever group they lived in, as a whole. Stonzai-" But then, as though Lisele's question had evoked it, a smaller Shrakken emerged from a building and came to face them. Taller than Lisele but with less height than either of the two women, it wore only a simple belt with a pouch hung at each side. Now it came within a pace of the three, and stopped, its triangular eyes blinking slowly.

Lisele looked to Rissa. "What should we do?"

"I think-" Smiling, moving slowly, Rissa stepped forward. When she was within reach, still keeping her movement slow, she put her hand out and touched fingers to the young alien's forehead. The eyes blinked faster then, and the smallish creature extended its own hand in turn; Rissa felt the hesitancy in its touch as beside her she heard a gasp and turned to see an adult Shrakken looming. Obviously a female, though the phalialike



ovipositor was shrunken now, not extended. But the important thing, the first item Rissa noticed, was that the creature held a knife. At the ready.

"We will none of us react," she muttered quickly, and without haste withdrew her hand from the young one, turning to face the adult who had come to protect it. It made no move. Slowly again, Rissa reached for that one's forehead; first it flinched backward, then seemed to relax, and allowed the touch. Then, deliberately, it sheathed the knife and used the freed hand to return Rissa's touch. So she said, "Lisele, Ellalee—you see how it is done?" Only murmurs answered her, but as she stepped back, Lisele moved to exchange tactile greeting with the youngster and Ellalee with the adult; then they changed partners and repeated the gestures. The adult said something in Shrakken, making the headbob Rissa could never interpret, then took the child's hand and escorted it away. The humans watched the two round the corner of a building and pass from sight.

"In a mite of trouble there, you think we could have been?" Ellalee's voice showed a residue of tension.

"Quite possibly, had we panicked or shown fight. But we did not."

"Right good thing you steadied me. A second more, I was ready to go for that knife."

"But you did not, and perhaps twenty or thirty Shrakken saw us all exchange peaceful greetings. I think it is not a bad thing we have done here, at all."

Lisele cleared her throat. "The young one's nice, anyway. Its fingers when it touched me—they seemed to vibrate, sort of. It felt good."

Rissa thought back. Had she felt any such thing? No, but perhaps the phenomenon was age-related. With a headshake she said, "Should we not return to *Inconnu Deux*? My stomach says that lunchtime is long past, and I think Tregare may be interested in the story of our experience here."

When they told him, aboard ship, his reactions proved Rissa correct.

Shrakken refueling gear was slow, but well before dusk *Inconnu Deux* was topped off. In quarters Tregare called council—his Control officers plus Ivan, Hagen Trent, Crowfoot and Dacia Kobolak. To one side-trying, Rissa thought, to look inconspicuous—sat Liesel Selene. Briefly smiling, Rissa paid heed to the meeting.

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"—and that," said Tregare, "brings us up to date. Next step, we go farside and check out Shtegel, the other Shrakken port."

"On an island, is it not?" said Rissa. "A largish one, in the middle of an archipelago?"

Tregare nodded. "Something like that. I guess you listened to Stonzai, this afternoon, closer than I did. Comes to place names, I even forget the two rivers alongside this port of Sassden."

"I remember," said Ivan Marchant, "but what's the point? The main thing, as I see it, is *how* do we check Shtegel out?"

Rissa looked to Tregare. When they had discussed this question, her own view had carried, but as captain it was his place to announce policy. He said, "This ship stays here; short hops waste fuel. We'll take one of the scouts, instead."

Ivan spoke again. "Good enough. Who goes, then?"

"Rissa and me, mostly," Tregare answered. "Stonzai, of course, to interpret. The rest, I haven't decided yet." He pointed a finger. "You stay, though, Ivan—in charge of the *Deux*."

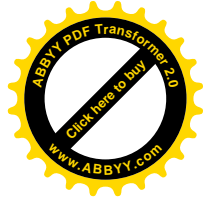
Anders Kobolak stiffened; Tregare said to him, "Ivan ranks alongside First Hat; you know that. And he has seniority." He turned back to Ivan. "Your job is the ship's safety. In case of trouble—" He shook his head. "I've got nothing special in mind, but this is new country and anything can happen."

"Guidelines?" Serious now, Ivan spoke only the one word.

Tregare shrugged. "Like I said. Keep the snip safe, first, last and always. If that means lifting off like an ory-eyed bat, and worrying about groundside later, you do it." He looked around the group. "Questions?"

"Not exactly," said Hagen Trent. "But it's those unidentified blips that bother you, not the Shrakken. Now has anyone given much thought to special tactics an FTL ship might use? Such as getting up to C and then popping in and out of supra-light isolation?"

Yes. Rissa saw possibilities, and could tell that the others were also considering new ideas. She said nothing; later, she and Tregare could discuss whatever was suggested here. And now from the next room came sounds of an awakening fretful



baby. Rissa excused herself and went to help Ellalee soothe Renalle. Certainly, for the next few days while she was away at the other Shrakken port, she would have no chance to enjoy her young daughter. But now she could do so. In a few moments, Lisele joined them.

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When the others had gone, Rissa and Tregare and Lisele ate in quarters. Tiny Renalle dozed in a crib near them; Ellalee's shift was over and she had left.

After the meal, over coffee and wine, Rissa asked how the discussion had gone, concerning possible FTL ship tactics. Lopsidedly, Tregare grinned. "Oh, it went fine- until we plugged in some numbers. Y'see-if the *Deux* were nearly up to C and spotted some STL bogies, sure, we could pass light and effectively vanish. And then dead-reckon to drop into sub-light and appear right in front of 'em, and cut one peace-ripping swathe! But how often would all the vectors be right, to pull that one off?"

"But we can change course," Lisele said. "Coming here we did, more than once. So why-?"

"Because when you start talking close quarters," said Tregare, "the numbers are different." Lisele looked as if she wished she hadn't spoken; he spread a hand toward her. "Don't feel bad; you're not the only one who got caught out-because going from Point A to Point B, the problem doesn't arise. But-" He thought, then nodded. "Use your calculator-I'll give you the same example that convinced Hagen Trent." She brought out the instrument, and waited. "All right-figure me the radius of a one-gee turn, at C, and keep in mind that halving the radius doubles the gees, and so on."

Rissa watched as Lisele worked out the problem, then looked up frowning. "Why, it's close to a light-year!"

Startled, Rissa said, "Truly?"

Tregare nodded. "Surprised me, too. Now one more, Lisele. Anders came up with a brainwave. A great way to *hide* an FTL ship would be, put it into a faster-than-light orbit. Dipping just below C at aphelion, so's to be accessible to communication periodically."

Wide-eyed, Lisele said, "That's a great idea!"

He sighed. "Plug in some numbers, honey. What's the radius of that orbit-around our own Sun, say?" After a time the child looked up and shook her head. "That's right," said Tregare. "Can't be done; you'd be inside the star. So-keep the primary the same size, orbit practically at the surface, and give me the surface gravity we'd need for the star."

This time the girl took a little longer, then canceled her results and tried a second time. Finally, in a low voice she said, "Something like twelve billion gravities. Is that right?"

"Close enough. I doubt you and Trent used exactly the same parameters, but you're in the same ballpark." For himself

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and Rissa he poured more coffee. "So, since I don't recall the data on black holes, and far's I know we don't have any around here close, we had to put the FTL-orbit idea back to bed."

Sated with coffee, Rissa sipped her wine. "And did you get any ideas that are usable?"

"If the *Deux* should have to skedaddle? Just one, arid nothing fancy." Pantomiming with his hands, he said, "Put the pilot in a gee-suit and cocoon everybody else in the chambers, and get up past light as fast as the pilot can stand it. Then a few days out, drop to zero and head back here." Again his hands demonstrated. "Homing in, don't figure to land on the first pass, but pop down below C to look the situation over. And maybe shoot the tail off somebody if you have the chance." He drained his cup. "Like it?"

For a time Rissa stayed silent; then she nodded. "Within the limits you cite, the plan has its merits. But yet-" Absently, she worried at a bit of food caught between two teeth. "Those numbers-I should like to study them a little further."

"Me, too," said Liesel Selene.



Next day at mid-morning-Shaarbant's day came to nearly twenty Earth-standard hours-Tregare readied the expedition. Rissa and himself, Stonzai and Sevshen and a ranking local Shrakken called Skandith. Or something like that; since that one and Rissa had no vocabulary in common, the name hardly mattered to her.

Then Hagen Trent and Jenise Rorvik, doubling as security people. Trent had little or no security training, but they would need his evaluation of Shtegel's technical facilities.

Half the *Deux's* personnel, it seemed, were crowded outside the scoutship's launching bay to see the group off. Too many, Rissa thought, and some merely in the way. *But do not bother.*

Tregare and Ivan exchanged a few words, and the scout's crew boarded. Its airlock closed; Rissa followed Tregare to Control. Stonzai and Skandith came along; behind them, the others stayed to strap down in bunks. Scouts, Rissa had cause to remember, were not always smooth riding. Not in atmosphere, at least.

When all were ready-Rorvik acknowledged for the passenger compartment-the launching bay opened. Ivan confirmed that the launch area was clear of bystanders, and Tregare hit the power switch. When the drive's hum was up to pitch he lifted the scout with a rash and took it high-but still within atmosphere- then leveled off.

Navigation was simple; Skandith pointed and spoke, and Stonzai translated for Tregare. Behind Sassden's river junction the ground rose, mottled green and brown, into tree-covered foothills that grew, as the scout flew above them, to be ridged mountains. Only the upper reaches showed free of timber, and at this latitude and season they held no snow.

"Rather pleasant terrain," said Rissa. "Is it not, Bran?"

"Nice enough." He chuckled. "Remember back on Number One, though? These mountains aren't a pimple on the Big Hills there."

"I suppose not." But still, she thought, enjoyable to see. Now the scout bucked as, below, the ground fell away again, becoming a vast wide valley that looked like jungle. Well, they *were* nearing the equatorial regions. Skandith pointed down to large darker patches; if Rissa understood Stonzai's translation, these latter were swamp.

For a time their course followed a river. Where it met with a much larger one, Skandith wiggled a hand, making it clear without words that Tregare should use the broad watercourse as guide. And he did so until, ahead, shining in sunlight the sea appeared.

From this angle it looked, to Rissa, greener than Earth's oceans. And since Shaarbant had no large moons-though a number of smaller ones-its major tides would be simpler, following only the planet's sun. The scout passed the shoreline; for a long time it flew over water, dotted with scattered islands. Some were brown and bare, others wooded.

Skandith pointed ahead, to the left, and Rissa saw a fantastic stretch of islands-large and small, reaching at least to the horizon. Like a hilly continent, partially flooded, she thought. Tregare shifted course with the pointing, and for nearly an hour the scout traversed this mix of land and water. And then Rissa saw the largest land mass of all this archipelago.

Roughly elliptical, it had four irregular peninsulas spaced around two-thirds of its shoreline. In the middle, inside a sort of ringwall like those of Luna's craters, stood a body of water. To Rissa's guess, its area was more than a quarter of the island's total. Her intake of breath came louder than she expected.

"Yeah," said Tregare. "When *that* volcano blew, I bet it made Krakatoa look like a wet squib." He squinted. "The lake-it must be close to eighty kilos across."

"And it is old, Bran-very old."

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"Right. I doubt the Shrakken can tell us much about it. I get the impression they arrived here fairly recently."

Before Rissa could answer, Skandith pointed ahead, where the largest peninsula met the main body of the island, and spoke rapidly. Rissa looked closely, and made out buildings and two ships. Stonzai said, "There, Skandith tells, land we do."

Tregare nodded. "Tell Skandith we're on our way." He slanted the scout down fast, spiraling around the installation below. This settlement was larger than Sassden, Rissa saw, and likely quite a lot older. Besides the construction, she saw that several thousand hectares of land were under cultivation-and in some areas the trees stood in orchard-like rows.

Tregare landed between the largest building and the two Shrakken ships that sat safely distant from it. He unbuckled and stood; the others followed him to where the



passengers were also getting up.

"It was a nice ride, but I wish I could have *seen* something."

"Liesel Selene!" Startled, Rissa found nothing more to say.

Tregare did, though. "Who told *you* to come along?"

Looking troubled, Jenise Rorvik grasped the child's arm. "Wasn't she supposed to? I thought--"

Lisele looked defiant. "Nobody said I *couldn't*."

Suddenly Rissa could not help laughing. "So you followed aboard, bold as brass, and everyone assumed you had permission."

Looking down, away from them all, Lisele said, "I won't be any trouble. If you say so, I won't even go groundside. But I did so want to *see* this place." No one spoke. "I-I'm sorry."

Moving quickly, Tregare went to hug her. "It's all right; you can come groundside, and all. But next time, ask."

"Yes, sure." For a moment the child's smile faltered. She looked at Rissa. "But if I'd asked this time, could I have come?"

Rissa paused, to visualize that asking and her response; then she nodded. "If Tregare had agreed, then so would I."

Lisele's gaze fixed on her father; he, too, took a moment to answer. "I'd have had misgivings--and then you two would have talked me out of them." He grinned. "Just like the question of bringing you on the *Deux* in the first place."

"Then let's go groundside," said Lisele. "What are we waiting for?"

It was mid-afternoon; cruising at atmospheric speeds, the trip had been a long one. So today's schedule, Rissa gathered

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from Stonzai's translations, was to see only the facilities for starship repair and modification. "Well, that's what we're here to find out," said Tregare. "Hang on, while I set up communication relay to the *Deux*, via the Shrakken ground-to-ground terminals, and we can go."

So they trekked first through the largest building, pausing to hear explanations, and then through several others. When they had seen what Stonzai said were most of the important areas, sunset neared. Rissa expected that the humans would eat on the scoutship, but Stonzai relayed an invitation to dine with the Shrakken.

Tregare looked to Rissa. She shrugged, and he said, "I don't see why not. Stonzai, tell Skandish we accept with thanks."

Jenise Rorvik spoke. "Excuse me--but there's a risk, you know." Tregare's brows rose; Rorvik said, "The Shrakken can eat some of our foods, and some not; they get sick. We may have the same problem."

Yes--on the *Deux*, Sevshen had been ill. But he was recovering by the time Rissa heard about it, so she hadn't followed up the incident. "That some of the food here, you mean, may be dangerous to us?" Jenise nodded. Rissa thought for a moment, then felt her involuntary frown clear. "The testing kit in the scout. Scoutships have multiple uses; remember? And one of these is that of emergency lifeboat. And since even a marginally habitable world may be the survivors' only possible haven, food-testing kits are essential. So we may--"

"Afraid not," Tregare cut in. He had a sheepish look to him. "I let Ornavay borrow the kits. Off both scouts. He and young Limmer were hell-bent eager beaver on checking out local vegetation, and maybe animal life, for edibility. I couldn't see any harm to it, so I okayed the project."

"Of course." Rissa nodded. "But then how, and especially without offending our hosts, can we determine what is safe to eat?"

"Maybe I can help," said Jenise. "Back at university I studied exotic plants for a while, and the ways some primitives used to handle them. It's a little messy, but it usually works. The rule is, smell everything first and begin with very small bites of what you do try, and chew them well. At any stage, if something doesn't fit with what you *know* is all right--too strong or rank, or you're simply not sure--discard it. Spit it out, if need be." She pushed back her blonde hair. "You may miss some gourmet treats, but you'll have better luck avoiding a gut-ache, too."

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Looking thoughtful, Tregare said, "Rissa, try to explain that to Stonzai, to pass to Skandish. So they'll know what we're doing, and why." Explaining, Rissa had to



repeat and paraphrase, but finally Stonzai reported that Skandish understood.

"That you of care must be, accept we do." So, following Skandish into a sprawling, slantwalled, one-level building, the party trooped through a long corridor into the Shrakken equivalent of a galley. The color blue predominated, but walls and ceiling bore random abstract designs in green and yellow.

There were no tables, and if human chairs did not suit Shrakken, the converse was also true. Balancing a tray piled with steaming vegetation, Rissa tried to use the "chair" and found herself half sitting and half standing, like perching on the edge of a tall barstool. Lisele's legs were too short to reach the floor; she could not maintain balance, so she had to stand.

Her tray, Rissa learned, fit onto a prong that came up from the front of the device. She looked at her eating utensils—two, mirror images of each other, like shallow spoons with one edge sharpened, and ending in three short tines. And a thing like a small spatula riddled with holes. She shrugged—when in Rome, watch to see how the Romans do it.

The three Shrakken and five humans were in a circle; elsewhere in the room, Shrakken formed other circles, some eating already and some still arriving. Looking at her tray, Rissa could not decide where to start, and except for Rorvik, her friends seemed in like case.

Jenise said, "This green spongy stuff is all right; tasty, too. Stay off the leafy things with the dark-red veins—oxalic acid, I think, like in rhubarb leaves." She chewed something else, nodded and swallowed; then she set down her hardware. "Look, there's no point in you all trying each item for yourselves. Why don't I check out everything, and then if you're willing to go with my judgment—but of course if *you* don't trust something I okay, speak up and say so. All right?"

"Fine with me," Tregare said, so as the others watched, Rorvik sampled each offering and gave verdicts. Six items approved, four thumbed down, the rest doubtful and thus left alone.

Except for Lisele, who balked at an approved vegetable that reminded Rissa of broccoli, everyone followed Jenise's decisions. But then, the child hated broccoli, anyway.

Nobody got sick. And the spatula, Rissa learned, was for squeezing juice from a yellowish ovoid; small bits of something

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else were dipped in the juice as a sauce, and the squeezed yellow pulp left uneaten. All in all, Rissa liked Shrakken cuisine.

After dinner, other Shrakken joined the group and they all went to another room, this one colored a soft umber and decorated with curved line designs in black. Here, not unexpectedly, were drinks. Recalling Stonzai's tastes, Rissa expected wines and brandies, and was mostly right. As she had done for Stonzai, now the Shrakken offered open containers for the humans to smell or taste. One reddish fluid, brandy or no, smelled much like bourbon, so Rissa chose it. She would have liked some ice, but saw none.

Now Stonzai spoke. "All, to listen must." She stood with a Shrakken who was short for its kind and moved stiffly; its facial markings were paler and less distinct than most. Old? Possibly.

Being among her own people made Stonzai's English even less comprehensible than usual, but Rissa understood that this Shrakken was named Sharvil. And Sharvil was the one who "spoke for" the port of Shtegel, and for the entire colony on Shaarbant.

Well. It was *time* they got down to cases. Rissa listened and stayed silent, leaving it to Tregare to handle negotiations.

From the timing of some of Sharvil's responses, Rissa guessed the older Shrakken had already been briefed on Tregare's proposals; certainly, Stonzai had known of them. Yet Tregare had to tell the whole thing—through Stonzai—from the beginning. All about the Hoyfarul Drive, and his intention to give FTL travel to the Shrakken.

Then came questions, and Tregare paused to consider his answers. Finally he said, "Judging by what you showed us, here on Shaarbant you can adapt your ships for FTL. But not right away." He squinted past Stonzai. "What you have is the tools to make the tools to do the job. Two years, I'd guess, if you're lucky." Earth years, Rissa supposed he meant; she doubted that he knew the length of Shaarbant's. *She* did not.

"So we can talk your technical people through the specs, and leave you a few sets



to work with. But then everybody's best bet is for us to go to Stenevo, as we'd planned- where we can get FTL conversions going in a hurry and on a big scale. That's-"

Now as Stonzai translated, Sharvil made shrill protest. Shaarbant did not *have* two years of safety, Stonzai relayed. No-the Earth ship must stay and be of aid!

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With seeming patience, though Rissa saw the tension in him, Tregare went through it again. Two years, to accomplish anything, and so few ships here for conversion. Were more expected? When? And these here now-how many were scheduled to leave soon?

"No." Stubborn now, Tregare shook his head. All Shrakken life, not just Shaarbant, was at stake. To stay here might doom the species and still not save this world. And when he finished, Sharvil raised a hand. Head moving in the way Rissa could never interpret, Sharvil spoke. And Stonzai slowly relayed the words.

"Then to go, you must. But by your saying, as much help as can be, leave with us you will."

"Yeah, sure, Stonzai. And we *will* stay long enough to help you get started." He turned to Hagen Trent. "How long to get printouts of all the dope they'll need? I mean, you couldn't have brought all of it, this time."

Trent nodded. "I brought only the drive specs; they can have those now. The rest-first I had to know what they have, and what not."

"Right." Tregare explained to Stonzai, then said, "Tomorrow we go back to the ship, then soon as we can-two-three days, Hagen?" Again the man nodded. "-we'll bring you everything else we can. Then I guess we're off to Stenevo. Agreed?"

Sharvil complained no longer, but asked surprisingly germane questions. Rissa felt her anxiety ease. Then, soon, the meeting adjourned; the humans returned to the scoutship. All were invited to spend the night groundside but only the three Shrakken accepted. "Not that I don't trust them," was Tregare's comment as they entered the scout and Rissa sealed it, "but having tried Shrakken chairs, I'm not sure I want to risk what their beds are like!"

At least, thought Rissa, Shrakken beds might have had privacy; the scout's bunks did not. Oh, they were curtained off from one another-but sounds carried. So, while Rissa agreed with Tregare's desires, this was not the right time and place. She could not make love silently; neither could she allow herself to be heard by others. Well, Lisele was a different matter; from infancy she had often shared even closer quarters, and simply took things for granted. Jenise Rorvik, though, and Hagen Trent? No.

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So, when Rissa was dozing off and a touch woke her, she felt brief anger. "Bran-no! I have told you."

For a moment, no answer; was this some intruder? But then he spoke. "Outside, the weather's nice. Like to take a little walk?"

Suddenly she giggled. "Why not?" She rummaged and found her robe, got up and put it on. Then, quietly, she followed Bran Tregare.

"Can I come too?" Lisele's voice was almost a whisper.

Rissa paused. Tregare squeezed her hand, leaned over to the curtain that hid the child, and whispered back, "For a few minutes, princess; then you come back inside. Because mainly we're going out to be by ourselves, a little while."

Barefoot, all three, they went to and down the ramp, then a few meters away from the scout. Tregare said, "Ground cover isn't damp, to speak of; let's sit, shall we?" When they did, he pointed upward. "See-two of the moons showing. Watch; you can see them move against the stars."

Neck craned, Rissa stared. Yes-one whitish disc and one orange, each slightly larger than a star's twinkling dot, inching across the starfield. "Are they as close together as they seem?"

"Not really," said Tregare. "On average, the orange one's half again as far out. Eccentric orbit, though, and near perigee right now." A pause. "The white one-if I remember right, it takes quite a slant from the ecliptic."

"It moves more," said Lisele, "than when we were at the ship."

Stellar light made vision ghostly; more than seeing, Rissa sensed Tregare's headshake. "Not the same moon; this one's a little brighter. The one you mean-from



here, we can't see it."

Rissa chuckled. "Bran, I had no idea you kept such a close check on this planet's satellites."

"The one we just mentioned? Special case-it's practically in synchronous orbit. Takes years to go around the planet. Right now it's somewhere above that big jungle valley we flew over."

They talked longer, Tregare pointing out his guesses of stars known on Earth. Rissa offered to bet against two of his choices, but he didn't take the wagers. Then Lisele said, "I'm getting cold," so her parents kissed the child goodnight and sent her back inside.

Tregare reached for Rissa. She responded, but said, "The chill is *not* entirely comfortable."

He laughed. "Almost forgot; I brought this big fat quilt."

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He wrapped it around them; they snuggled together. And a little later, if stars or moons heard Rissa's cries, she did not care at all.

An hour past dawn, everyone on the scout was up and dressed. Lisele poured fruit juice, and Tregare made coffee, but said, "We shouldn't eat yet, in case somebody wants to invite us out." When no one did, after a time he heated and served a round of standard rations. Then, after Hagen and Jenise did a quick job of cleanup duty, the group waited. An hour, before Tregare stood, and said, "I don't know protocol around here, but I think it's time we go look people up."

First, relaying through the Shrakken comm-net, he called *Inconnu Deux*. At the ship, Ivan reported, all was well. "Okay," said Tregare, "I guess we can get on the march."

Only Tregare and Rissa went. Hagen Trent's digestion was giving him delayed reactions to last night's dinner, so he stayed aboard, nominally in charge. Jenise and Lisele wanted to explore a little. "All right. But stay within sight of the scout."

Once outside, Tregare headed for the building where they had met Sharvil. The Shrakken galley held only a few attendants, making slow work of tidying the place, so Tregare and Rissa went to the other room they knew. And found six Shrakken, including Sharvil, plus the three who had come in the scout. Rissa spoke greetings; Stonzai relayed them. Sharvil answered, and Stonzai said to Tregare, "Back to ship now, today, we go?"

He nodded. "I'd thought so. Expected you on the scout, though, earlier. We waited quite a while."

"Sharvil *here*, to talk, waits." So, thought Rissa-the Shrakken leader stood on form. But why had not Stonzai told them?

At any rate, now Tregare and Sharvil negotiated. At first, rather than moving the scout back and forth, Sharvil wanted him to bring the *Deux* to Shtegel-and offered to replace the fuel wasted in such an inefficient short hop. But Tregare refused; aside, to Rissa, he said, "I wouldn't like to *tempt* these nice folks."

Equally soft-voiced, she said, "I think the problem would not arise-but if we are to misjudge, let it be on the side of caution."

Then Sharvil wanted a firm time for the scout's return, bringing the FTL conversion data. Tregare shrugged. "Two-three days was my engineer's guess. He's not here, and I can't commit

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him to a definite time when he knows the answers better than I do." And after several rephrasings, Sharvil eventually accepted that answer.

Then came the forehead-touching ceremony, and they left- Rissa, Tregare, Stonzai and Sevshen. Skandith would remain at Shtegel. Outside, Rissa saw Lisele and Jenise near a grove of trees. Tregare gave a piercing whistle, startling the Shrakken so that each gave a little jump; he pointed to the scout, and everyone began running toward it. Rissa overtook Tregare, and wondered if he were losing stamina, but he winked at her, and she also slowed. The Shrakken passed them, making whuffling noises that could have been laughter as they moved in their toe-dancing lope. Jenise, Rissa saw, was not overtaking Lisele very rapidly.

Stonzai and Sevshen reached the upramp first, with the four humans in a near-tie. Tregare picked up Lisele. "The champ."

Laughing as they went up the ramp, she said, "Someday I really will be."



There was time, Tregare said, to get back to the ship before mid-afternoon. "Especially since we're going *against* the planet's rotation. Over more than two radians of longitude, the time differences add up." Mentally, Rissa converted the figure—yes, about a third of the world's circumference.

"Well, then," she said. "Shall we strap in for liftoff?"

"Can I sit in Control this time," asked Lisele, "so I can see everything?" Hagen Trent had started in that direction; now, smiling, he shrugged and went toward a bunk instead.

Tregare said nothing, so Rissa answered. "All right. Come along, and Set us make sure of your safety harness."

While she did so, Tregare called the *Deux*. Anders Kobolak had the watch; he patched the intercom through to Ivan's quarters. "Marchant here. All's calm so far. You coming back soon?"

"Preparing to lift," Tregare said. "See you by mid-afternoon, or close to it. Tregare out." He cut the circuit and activated his drive; when its hum built to suit him, he nodded and hit the power lever. Vibrating under thrust, the scout rose. As the ground fell away and swooped to one side, then further as Tregare set his climb angle, Rissa saw Lisele grip the arms of her seat. And realized that the child *hadn't* ridden a scout this way before.

The ring-shaped island slipped over the horizon behind;

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soon the entire archipelago followed it, and after a time the -mainland lay ahead. Not obviously, though; their earlier trip had been under mostly clear skies; but now, below, cloud layers hid much of the shoreline and the land beyond. The great river's mouth was hidden. Rissa turned to Stonzai. "The river?"

The alien pointed left, where cloud masses covered all surface features. "There, should be it."

Tregare grinned. "Doesn't matter. The course-and-speed integrator in this bucket's little computer isn't calibrated for fine detail, but it'll do. Because if things are socked-in at the far end, we can home on the *Deux's* beacon."

About halfway, by Rissa's guess, across the shallow jungled bowl of valley, ahead they saw the mountains come into view. Only their upper reaches showed above the cloud layer that hid the valley below, but Lisele smiled and pointed to them. "Yeah," Tregare said, "something to see, finally. Too bad you weren't up here yesterday, when—" Then his face twitched and he fell silent; the scout jerked with the sudden tremor of his hands. Rissa's head gave a stab of pain; her vision blurred; then the moment passed.

"Bran! Did you feel-?"

"Something—as if-I don't know. It's all right now."

From Stonzai came a groan. Rissa looked; if the Shrakken agreed with Tregare, her appearance did not show it. The sidewise-moving eyelids closed tightly, and the V-mouth made a triangle that bared clenched teeth. Words came. "It-it the *Tsa* is!"

"Stonzai!" Rissa touched her. "Is it still hurting you?"

Strangely, unreadably, the Shrakken's head moved. "Attacking now, they not. But for pain to ease, a time takes."

Rissa turned. "Lisele—did *you* feel anything?"

Squinting upward, at the sky, the child said, "For a second, everything flickered, was all. But I saw-up there, some dots moving." She shook her head. "Gone now."

Cursing, Tregare threw a switch. Beeps sounded, and on a sidescreen five blips appeared. "Stupid!" he muttered. "Flying with topside detectors off, just because—" Swiftly the blips moved offscreen; he twiddled dials to no effect as the beeps died away. "Well, that does it!" He pointed the scout steeply down; the speed indicator showed a rapid increase.

"Bran. Are you sure?"

"Enough. The Shrakken don't *have* five ships here, and

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weren't expecting any, just yet." He shrugged. "Doesn't prove anything, I know. But let's get home like a bat!"

They sat, tense, as Tregare drove the scout, bucking at the limits of stability in atmosphere, across the great valley. Skimming the cloud layer, occasionally they passed through its upper promontories. After ten minutes, then twenty, Rissa saw



her husband begin to relax. Even Stonzai, except for the way she gripped the seat's arms, looked normal again.

Then the detector alarm sounded; Tregare reached for the screen controls. "No, Bran," Rissa said. "I will do it. Hying this low, you need all your concentration." Her third try gave results-five blips, homing from above and behind. Homing *fast*.

Tregare's first choice of words showed little imagination. Then, "All right-we can't outrun that lot, or outmaneuver. Not in a scout. But maybe we can outslick 'em!" Abruptly they dropped into cloud, and kept dropping. Then the scout was braking, *hard*. "If I can set down before they get here, and cut drive-"

"The jungle! Bran-"

"Landing blast should clear the ground; let's hope so." The scout lurched; Stonzai made a shrill bleat. "In my head again!" Tregare shouted. "You feel anything?"

"I-I am not certain." Had she? Rissa could not be sure.

With forward motion almost stopped, Tregare pointed the nose up; the craft began to settle. From below, Rissa heard rumblings- then pain clutched her mind, and shook it. Stabs of light came; she fought to see and think; nausea struck. Tregare's fist beat the control panel; he screamed. Lisele cried, "Oh, make it *stop!*"

A crashing jolt as the scout hit dirt; then it tipped. Power came on in a great surge- by Tregare's purpose, or a random swipe of his hand? To Rissa's left, something dealt the scout a staggering blow, then another. Pain shattered her thinking; the next impact came directly facing her, and her safety harness cut cruelly. Tregare's tore loose, and he was thrown against the controls.

Teeth clenched, Rissa batted at the power switch-and again, until she got it. Then the pain flowered so brightly that she saw nothing more, and heard only the dying cough of the scout's drive.

To feel her consciousness leaving was total relief.

Rissa woke to pain-of mind and of body, and for a time she could not separate the two. But her mind cleared, and she

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found herself hurtfully suspended by her harness. The scout, then, lay on the side she faced. Carefully she tested arms and legs; each moved, not pleasurably. After a moment she decided how to free herself safely; one hand on each side's harness release, she pushed them, and fell bruised and sprawling against her control panel.

Normal lighting was gone; the dim glow of the emergency system lit the place. She looked; Tregare lay still, but he breathed. His face was turned away; blood smeared the part she could see. And his left leg bent wrongly. She crawled toward him.

But above her, once and then again, she heard a faint gurgling gasp. Something spattered on her neck. Rissa looked up.

Horror! Half in her harness and half out, one strap across her chest and another cutting into her throat, Lisele hung. The child's face was purple and blackening; one bleeding hand was inside the strap at her neck, and the oilier clawed feebly at it.

Adrenaline struck; time slowed. Clambering to her feet, Rissa reached for Lisele's harness to pull herself up; the task took seeming hours. With one foot in a loop of her own loose-hanging harness, her left hand reached for the catch that would free Lisele's throat-but from where she hung, she had no leverage. And the child swung there, barely making any sound.

Panting, Rissa let go the catch, bent her leg and jumped- with only one arm and leg to propel her. Now the time-stretch helped-in mid-air she lunged, with both hands, for the catch.

And got it. Falling, unable to protect herself from impact, she saw the strap fly loose, and Lisele suspended only by her chest. Then the edge of the control panel crashed against her kidney. Agony shot through her and blanked her mind.

When she could think, she found herself again trying to reach Lisele. This time the climb was almost impossible, but at its end, the task was not. She rigged her own harness to hold her-swaying, semi-upright-wrapped her left arm through Lisele's restraints and around the child, and carefully released the final strap. Lisele's weight unbalanced her, but she managed to hold. Then, figuring each move carefully, it took long minutes to get the child down safely.

At any rate, Lisele was breathing. Had she needed resuscitation she would have died, for Rissa could not have given it in time. She lowered her daughter past the control consoles to a bare section of forward bulkhead, and laid her down with limbs

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straight. None was broken; good; the mouth was free of blood or phlegm. And now normal color was returning to the small face.

Rissa stood, and climbed back onto the now-horizontal control panel. It was time to see to Tregare.

The panel was not quite level; the scout, she decided, was lying a bit nose-down. She considered the matter longer than need be, so that she would not have to think of what must be done-or of what *could* be done, which might be very little indeed.

Surprising her, Tregare had his eyes open. "She all right?"

"Bran! How long have you been awake?" She shook her head. Her coiled hair had come loose; part of it fell across her face. Irritably she pushed it back. "No-first, how badly-you-?"

His hand made a small motion; he winced and flexed it, then shrugged, and winced again. "You see the leg. When we have time, you'll have to set it." At her start of protest, "You know how; you trained at Erika's." When she nodded, he said, "Still more than half deadhead, I was, dizzy with hurting, when something fell and jarred me. You?" Again she nodded. "I'll ask later. Next I knew, you were climbing up. Toward Lisele, hanging there, face all purple. Didn't say anything; why distract you?"

How could he look so calm? "So I waited. *Is she all right?*"

"By great luck, perhaps a miracle. Her harness slipped somehow; she was hanging-Bran, for a time I did not think I could free her!"

Her left hand was near enough that he could clasp it. "You did, though. Peace be thanked, Rissa-you did!" He squinted past her, up where Lisele had dangled. "And from here, I can't think how you managed." He tried to turn his body; she saw his teeth clench. "Ugh! We can't move me until that leg's set. First, though-you've had no chance to check on anyone else, yet. For starters, how about Stonzai?"

She had not thought-she had not *thought* of any others. Not Stonzai, nor of those who had suffered the crash in isolation, strapped in bunks and knowing nothing of the peril. "Oh, Bran! Wait-I will go and see."

Again she climbed, this time not in frantic hurry. She reached Stonzai and found the Shrakken female hanging against her safety harness as Rissa had done, when she woke, and

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breathing evenly though not yet conscious. From the alien's mouth trickled bright orange blood. Judging by the puddle below, the stream had been larger and was dwindling; in itself, the blood loss should not be serious. At this point Rissa could do nothing helpful; she climbed past Stonzai's seat position and found footing to stand. And from here she could see the hatch that gave access to the bunkroom.

The hatch was slightly ajar. At what was now its lower edge, something dark moved, and grew. Even in the dim light, Rissa could see that it had to be blood. Not a great Sot, here-but at the source?

And it was not bright orange. The stuff was dark red.

IX. Elzh

Again now the beastworld-near!

Too soon, with Elzh in fret for Tserln and Ceevt. Idsath had projected that itself and Tserln, indling, could fill the young with warm thought to turn mindpain away, and Elzh followed that hope. Still, though-two less Tsa to strike at mindbeasts. Of five ships, only.

And now, beastworld. Twice around it, so near to mindpain range as to brush that world's gases, Elzh's ships curved.

Only two places, distant from each other, showed mindbeast sign. Two ships at the



larger; at the smaller, three. But there, the third was the ship that came out of nothing!

To decide-as correct, as understood. Pain and dread would be, but Tsa-Drin law gave no choice. Mindsaying the need and regret, Elzh directed the five ships to descend. Gases tugged at the speed of Elzh's ship; it shuddered, almost as Elzh did.

But ships cannot feel dread.

Down toward beastworld, within mindpain distance, and slowing. But nearing surface *between* mindbeast places, the

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curve of beastworld itself shielding Tsa from pain. To now, then, success for Elzh. And time for thinking. But always, to obey.

Then, below, the *small* ship-and in it, some mindbeasts not the same. At first, no mindpain-never deadly it came, Elzh knew, until the beasts detected Tsa. So-to strike first! Yes.

Quickly, Elzh mindsaid, and with agony the Tsa threw attack. At first, no seeming effect-then the small ship faltered, but soon recovered course. As mindpain struck! To evade! Up and up, to observe at safe distance while Tsa healed from mindbeasts' return attack. Then turn and pursue. Mindsaying and mindhearing with all crewmates, Elzh exulted. Even with two kinds of mindbeasts, this small ship was no match for the Tsa!

Now down again, nearing the tiny thing-strike! Below the opaque gases it went; Elzh's mind ranged there without finding. But strike again! And more, and more!

Soon then, no more feel of mindbeasts. Up again, the Tsa ships now. Mindsaying, as near to indling as can be over distance, Elzh spoke the ships. Finding hurt, as expected, but fastly healing. And from TserIn the thought that Ceevt, the young, had felt no pain.

So. As the Tsa-Drin wills. But the ship from nothing, that still waited, was not small. Best to strike it at speed, so that if mindpain built into death-risk, Elzh's ships would be soon away to safe distance.

Then, no matter how strong the ship might be, that had come out of nothing, Elzh's five ships would wait. High above this beastworld, so that the strange ship could have no chance to leave it.

Elzh's mindsaying ended. Toward the place where the ship from nothing stood, the Tsa fleet turned.

X Ivan

After Tregare signed off, Ivan resumed his meal with Dacia Kobolak-his breakfast, her after-watch dinner. "So we'll see them about mid-afternoon," he said, and told her of Tregare's agreements with the Shrakken leader at Shtegel. "Soon as I check the watch logs, I'll get on the computer and start coding out the Hoyfarul Drive data. Maybe I can give Hagen a head start." Done eating, he stood. "If I save a day or so, we can lift for Stenevo that much sooner."

Standing also, Dacia said, "Are you in a hurry, Ivan?"

He shrugged. "The Shrakken seem to be. Maybe they're right."

They went to First Hat's quarters. While Dacia prepared for bed, Ivan riffled papers until he found what he needed. He gave Dacia her goodnight kiss; then, impatient, he climbed to Control.

The watch logs held no surprises; Ivan initialed acceptance and Anders Kobolak nodded in acknowledgment. Then, at the primary computer terminal, Ivan ran his data search. Jeremy Crowfoot interrupted, suggesting a coffee break, and in the galley the two men discussed the scope of what the Shrakken would need to know. Afterward, upship again, Crowfoot helped with the data retrieval and finally said, "That's really all I can think of. I'd run it through once again to cut redundancy, and leave it for Trent to check."

"Right. Thanks for sitting in, Jere." Crowfoot left. Ivan punched directions for pruning the data, and the new readout began. He nodded; this version came out shortened by nearly a third.

By his chronometer, more time had passed than he'd realized. Dacia would have had her refresher nap and might be in a mood for company. No need to check out with Anders Kobolak...



But as Ivan reached the door, the Second Hat said, "Blips- something upstairs. Look quick!" Ivan turned to peer. On the topside screen five dots moved. Anders moved dials, trying to follow them, but in seconds they were gone, offscreen.

Ivan frowned. "What kind of a track does Tinhead show?"

"Just a minute; I'm on it." Impatient, Ivan waited until Kobolak looked up and said, "They weren't on screen long enough to be sure-but roughly, at the edge of atmosphere, and too fast for orbit. Using power to hold such tight curvature. Marchant-do you think-"

Ivan shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I think. We have to assume-" Scowling, he nodded. "Sound general quarters; everybody groundside, get aboard fast. All projector turrets and missile controls manned until further notice." He paused. "And get the drive warmed up. Now."

Kobolak relayed those orders, then turned back to Ivan. "You're thinking of lifting off? With Tregare out there still?"

Ivan didn't like the man's expression. "You heard Tregare: keep this ship safe at all costs. *That's* what I'm thinking."

Anders didn't meet his glare. "Of course. But for a minute there-"

"You thought I'd use his orders as excuse to abandon him, and keep command."

He leaned forward; Kobolak flinched. The man was no coward; Ivan wondered what his own face showed. Trying to relax it, he shook his head. "My sister's out there, too-not to mention my niece, Lisele. Rissa and Tregare-I owe them my life, and more."

Now Kobolak looked up. "I'm sorry. Don't know what got into me."

"I know. You're chuffed that I have command. But that's all right-so long as you're sure you've got it out of your system."

He raised his eyebrows, and Kobolak nodded. "I'm sure."

What else to say? Nothing. Ivan clapped a hand to the other's shoulder. "Continue alert procedures; keep gunnery and drive informed. I'll be back soon-before those ships can get around the planet, let alone spiral in close enough to worry." For in atmosphere, projector range was drastically reduced.

"All under control, then," Anders said, "until you return."

Turning away, Ivan paused. "Not much chance, with the scout's antennas pulled in so they won't break off, plowing air, but try calling Tregare, anyway. To let him know what we're up against."

Now Kobolak could smile. "Right away." He spoke to his comm-tech. After a moment, Ivan nodded and left Control.

Fast, he went downship. Not enough time, probably, for him and Dacia-but at least, for a little while, they could talk.

And suddenly he needed to be with her.

There was time, Dacia insisted, for both talk and love. But plagued by the distraction of the ship's danger, Ivan could not reach completion. Finally, though, lying with her and giving up that particular goal, panting and sweating he felt better, anyway.

He checked the time. "A fast shower; all right?" They took it together, and dried themselves quickly. He said, "Time for a short drink? *Very* short." And sipping from the ice-tinkling glass, he muttered, "If we have to lift-"

"You've planned for that?" How could she look so unworried?

"I have to." He felt his scowl but couldn't release it. "We're groundside. Hoyfaral Drive or no-any ship upstairs, with speed on, has us by the knockers."

She squeezed his hand. "But you've thought of an answer?"

"No. Tregare did. I'm just trying to figure the best way to use it." And then it was time for him to get back upship.

Lower than before but not by much, again the five ships passed above. This time, aided by the computer's track of the earlier contact, the *Deux's* screens followed from horizon to horizon. "At the last, there," said Anders, "they changed flight angle, and slowed. They're coming down."



Ivan nodded; the statement was obvious. More important- on high-mag, with time to tune reception, the screens had caught the ships on visual. The picture wavered, but there was no question-those five weren't Shrakken. Nor, of course, human.

"So," he said, "that leaves the Tsa." Arlen Limmer's face showed excitement; the boy suggested a possible unknown alien species. Ivan shook his head. "The point is, it wouldn't matter. We have to assume the worst case." Without speaking, Arlen nodded.

Ivan had never seen the control room so full of people, some in the extra seats and others standing. With intercom circuits open to gunnery turrets and the drive room, effectively the entire crew was present. Yet the talk went slowly. Kobolak hadn't been able to reach Tregare; that fact seemed to put a damper on everyone. A thought nagged at Ivan, and finally he recognized it.

He rapped knuckles on the control panel. "One moment,

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please. Something that needs doing-if we have to lift, we should leave Tregare a supply cache." He looked around. "Third Hat?"

Ornaway stood. "Orders?"

"Yeah. You test-flew Number Two scout, when we broke it out to sit groundside. In top shape, is it?" The young man nodded. "Then that's our cache. Is it fully stocked?" Another nod, and Ivan returned it. "Let's do better--beef up the stores a little." He paused to think. "Two one-hand energy guns, plugged in to stay at full charge, and one of the big portables, too. Plus three-four extra needlers with plenty of ammo." And what else, now?

He asked, and Anders said, "Communication. To let Tregare know where the scout is. I mean, we'll have to hide it."

Of course! Damn! Ivan realized he was letting worry cloud his thinking. He punched for screen display of a local terrain contour map. "Where's a good place? And Kobolak-about the communications?"

Anders' ideas made sense: automatic timing for the scout to transmit, at intervals, short bursts of recognition signals on frequencies Tregare could receive. And receipt of a proper answer would key the sending of the scout's location code. "Good enough," said Ivan, and turned the group's attention to the screened map. "So where do we hide the scout?"

Crowfoot liked a low island, out in the river-junction delta. "The wooded part, with all those irregular clearings." The problem was that reaching the spot would involve crossing water, which might be difficult for Tregare, later, or might not. Ivan picked a dry flat-bottomed gully, angling off the lefthand river about two kilos upstream. Narrow, it looked, and partly overhung by tall trees up the high banks.

"Not perfect cover," Ivan said, "but usable if Hask sets the scout in without burning much foliage. Vote?" The gully won. "Ornaway? You think you can be gentle with the shrubbery?"

"I'll pick a fair-size opening, and at the last, throw side-drift."

Ivan grinned. "Good enough. Two things, now. One is, I know we took hell and forever to decide, but now do it *fast*. Push comes to lift, we don't want to be leaving you behind." Ornaway waited. "The other thing. You won't have to walk back; I'll send you a ride."

The Third Hat left, with two persons to help him stock the scout. Ivan looked back and forth among the assembled group. "Limmer!"

Arien stood. "Yes?"

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"You're good with aircars. Go take one up. Until Ornaway moves the scout, stay downriver, out of his way. Thee follow. Forget the map; just land near where he does, and bring him back. Got it?"

At first the boy looked unbelieving; then his chest swelled and his grin stretched wide. "Yes. I'll be careful about the trees, too." Ivan suppressed a smile and waved a half-salute; in any case, the aircar wouldn't leave noticeable marks. Limmer waved back, and left.

So far, so good, thought Ivan. But what have I overlooked?



On the screen Scout Two and then the aircraft hopped over the ridge of hills and sank out of sight. The wait, then, was too long—in the gully, what was happening?

"Ivan," Dacia began; then her face twisted and she screamed. "The Tsa!" The screen bloomed with five ships, coming low at first, then starting to rise. To Ivan came recognition and then adrenaline and then pain that put his hands to his head to keep it from bursting. His vision blanked; then it worked again.

Pain or no pain—and he heard his own voice whimper, and didn't know when it had begun, and couldn't make it stop—he reached for the screen's tracking controls. And one thrust, was all he could make—set them to follow those ships. If he could have seen better, held purpose against the pain—but everything *hurt*. He felt himself sliding down out of the control seat, fingers scrabbling to no avail.

Then he welcomed the blackness.

"Ivan!" Dacia's voice. "Oh, peace—my *head*. Ivan?"

What with the urgent voice, and being shaken by the shoulders, Ivan forced himself awake. In two tries he pulled himself up into his seat. Shaking his head was a mistake and opening his eyes was worse; light stabbed like swords and the lids clamped shut again. More cautiously, he blinked them open a little at a time, absorbing the hurt in increments. "Dacia?"

She tried to hug him. "You're all right?"

"Maybe." No time, now, for hugging. He shrugged away, looked at the screen and saw nothing. "What's upstairs?"

As she leaned across him he saw tears following the little channels from her eyes and dropping from her cheeks. "Those ships?" she said. "Gone now. And now we know what the Tsa are, don't we? Clawing into our minds!" All her body, that Ivan could see or feel, trembled. "The screen's blank; they're gone. But what can we *do*?"

"I think—" He came upright and bore the pain of it, and leaned forward to the controls and hurt more, and yet knew he was past the worst of it. "If I got the right switch when they attacked," he said, "then we have them on tape. What they did, where they went."

Leaving the main screen watching upstairs in real time, he put the tape on an aux viewer, and carefully noted what he saw. And thought about it. "They made a hedgehop pass here, and then turned straight up, tight as they could. Dacia—when they hit us, hurting, how close do you think they were?"

"I saw them top the horizon." Now her voice was steadier. "I started to tell you, when the attack came. Only a second or two—"

"Just long enough for them to spot us," said Anders Kobolak. Rubbing his neck, he grimaced as he moved it.

Ivan kept his cursing unvoiced. "So we still have no idea what their range is." Looking round, he shrugged, then wished he hadn't. Some people were sitting up and some not. The one man—was he even breathing? To Dacia he said, "Well, first things first. You're in charge of casualties. See how bad everybody was affected; maybe we can find some correlations." Then a thought came. "The baby! Peace take me, what would that mind-clawing do to Renalle?"

He hit the intercom for captain's quarters. "Ellalee—are you there? Is Renalle all right?"

After a pause, the woman's voice said, "When it happened, she was asleep. Near as I can tell, she didn't even notice."

Dacia leaned forward. "And yourself?"

"I—all right if I come upship, and bring Renalle? I don't fancy being alone just now."

"Sure." And soon the young aborigine came in, carrying her charge. She looked well, but Ivan asked, "How bad did it get you?"

Sitting, settling the sleepy baby comfortably, Ellalee said, "Not so badly as some, looks as though. It hurt like all billy, and googled my eyesight, but I kept control, right enough. Just couldn't *do* much of anything. It was like—" She frowned, then nodded. "I'm from the Outback, you know—a big place, and in our part a white man was something rare, something to stare at. I was the only half-breed in the tribe. Children ran the bush and desert, naked. Come puberty, the old men cut away at your private parts with their dirty knives, so's you wouldn't enjoy sex much."



One side of her mouth smiled, then didn't. "I ran away. I wasn't the first. OS to the west was a white men's dig--the building of Lena Hulzein's Aussie branch HQ, though we didn't know that at the time--and several young boys and girls had fled there." Again she grimaced. "You should see what the old men do to the boys. The penis gives so many opportunities for surgical cleverness."

Ivan shook his head. "And cruelty perpetuates itself. If it was good enough for daddy, it's good enough for sonny." And wasn't that the way it had been for him, too, in Welfare? Not quite, but bad enough. He said, "You ran. And the old men chased you?"

"Too right; I saw my turn coming, and lit out. A week, ten days, from the installation; one water bag and about half the dried meat I could have used." Ellalee muffled a cough. "The old men--not old in your terms. Life's short in the Outback, for abos. But old enough to be past resenting their own mutilation, and be good hunters. If they'd caught me, I was stonkered for sure."

He had to keep attention on the topside screen, and certainly they weren't going anywhere just now, but still her story was running long. "I know you have a point to make, Ellalee."

"Right, 'pologetics and all. Three days I ran--really ran, much as I could manage--and behind me they were never in sight, but I knew." She shuddered. "Some they'd caught and brought back, you understand. Boys and girls both. None of them good for much, afterward, except scavenging."

Ivan looked hard at her, and she talked faster. "The third night, no food left and little water, and I knew they were close behind. If they kept on I'd be done, and for that day my legs were gone; I needed to go farther but I couldn't. So I buried into the lee of a sand dune and breathed through a hollow stalk of weed."

Her eyes widened; Ivan wondered what she saw. "Near asleep, when I heard the muttering. Not far off, but I couldn't hear words. Pointing the bone, though, they had to be. Their way of setting a curse; if they still have a claim on your mind, it kills you."

"But you'd rejected them. Is that it?"

"Thought I had. But I could still feel it on me. Lay there, and fought the death pushing at me. If they'd seen me and come, I couldn't have moved. But they didn't; a long time they chanted, and then went away. Gone in the morning--but their curse wasn't. All I could do to walk, early that day, but by noon I was mostly free. Then, only two days' walk without food, and the last with no water."

Her eyes came into focus; incredibly, she laughed. "And the Hulzein people taught me English and numbering, and about clothes and such, and there I was with the great luck to be in the right time at the right place, later, to come into space training."

His brows raised; she spoke quickly. "The point is, that what those aliens did to us--well, it felt of a muchness to what the old men did, when I lay under the sand. And if I fought it then--?"

Ivan looked up; the screen was still clear. "Then maybe you can resist the Tsa, better than most. All right; when there's time, you start learning how to fly this ship, and gunnery, too, I think."

Ellalee shook her head. "But I have *no* such training. I--"

"You're the one person aboard that the Tsa can't put out of control." The statement, Ivan realized, might be prematurely optimistic. All he really knew was that the Tsa hadn't done it yet.

Scout Two didn't answer--and the aircar hadn't returned. On sidescreen Ivan scanned toward the gully, and saw no wreckage. Impatient, starting to jitter, he wanted a drink or drugstick. Not now, though...

Then at the edge of the forest, two dots moved. "Anders!" Kopolak looked, also. "Ornaway and Limrner?"

"Let's hope so. They're a long way off, though."

Nothing to do but wait. Dacia came to report: one man had died of the Tsa attack, and two others were still too weak to function. Everyone else, she said, was recovering. "More or less. A few are still disoriented, but improving fast." Suddenly, she sobbed once. The second sound might have been a hiccup.

Giving her a quick, one-armed hug, Ivan turned to her brother. "Anders, have the dead man put in freeze. Not all the hookup; just for preservation. No time now for the courtesies; they'll have to wait. Not forever, though." As Anders relayed the order, Ivan looked back to the screen. Too far to recognize the approaching men, but



the sizes were right. The Orna-way-sized one cradled one arm in the other. Well, until they reached the ship, no way to know what had happened.

"Look!" Anders pointed at the topside screen. One blip flashed across, while another drifted to a halt. "What-?"

Squinting, Ivan punched computer keys and had an answer. "Synchronous orbit, or close to it. Directly on top of us-or

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rather, on our meridian bat at the equator." His laugh, he knew, sounded more like a snarl. "They've set us a watchdog."

"And what else?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

What they saw, eventually, was Tsa ships going over at regular intervals, with less time between passes than the *Deux* would need to reach the watchdog ship. Ivan was still considering the situation when Oraaway and Limmer entered Control.

He said, "Welcome back. Glad you made it." Young Limmer had a bruised face and bloody nose, but he moved well enough. Orna-way, though, still cradled one arm in his other hand, and his pale face held taut with pain. Ivan went to him. "Sit down. What happened?"

Orna-way sat. "If it was the Tsa thing, then you know how it hit us. All I've got here is a busted collarbone. Arlen was awake more than I was; let him tell it."

Arlen Limmer swallowed once. "Lucky, compared to what could have been. Haskell sat the scout down with barely a mark on the trees. I landed beside, and he got into the aircar and I lifted. Then-" His face convulsed into lines of pain.

"Then," said Ivan, "the Tsa ships came, and something clawed in your head so you couldn't hold onto a spoon if you were starving to death! That about right?" Limmer nodded. "Don't fret; we all got it, and at least you lived. One man, here, didn't. All right, Arlen; then what?"

Again the young man made a gulping sound. "I'd lifted out of the gully fast, the way you said to, and was slanting over the ridge, when it hit." If ever a face showed incomprehension, Limmer's did. "I don't *know*. Everything hurt and I couldn't see right. Tried to gun the car topside where at least we wouldn't hit anything, but my hands went numb; I couldn't feel what I was doing." For a moment he put his face into those hands, then looked up again. "The car spun out on me and we crashed. Upside down, I think, but we could have rolled, afterward, to get that way. Hask was thrown out of his seat; harness failed, maybe." The boy shook his head. "I don't think I was ever knocked out all the way. But for a long time I couldn't break past the pain and *move*. When I could, I climbed down to Hask. He was awake by then, but I was shaking too bad to try to set the fracture; all the way here, walking, he just had to hold it." The voice was plaintive. "We did the best we could."

Ivan nodded. "No blame; you did well, both of you." He

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looked to where Jeremy Crowfoot was tending Orna-way's shoulder. "Congratulations, in fact."

"But the aircar's a total loss." Sullen, the boy sounded.

Shrugging off irritation, Ivan said, "Aircars we can spare; people, we can't. You had some luck and I'm glad you did. Now, are your guts unchurned enough, you can eat something? I expect you need to. So why don't you hit the galley?"

He nudged Dacia; she moved to escort the two men. Nursing, Ivan Marchant reflected, wasn't his best skill. Or even close.

With no word from Tregare, mid-afternoon came and passed. Ivan assigned Jeremy Crowfoot as ad-hoc watch officer and called an executive session. "Captain's quarters; my place is too small." He watched everyone's reactions. Anders didn't protest, and no one else seemed concerned. *All right*.

As soon as the group assembled, Ivan began. "We don't know what's happened with Tregare. If he ever got Scout One high enough for line-of-sight, I expect he'd have called. Or answered-we've had a call-tape on his frequencies, and no response. So it looks as if we're on our own."

Half standing, Alina Rostadt raised a hand. "Ivan-you're not writing Tregare off yet, are you? And Rissa?"

Because he liked the woman, he didn't shout. "Course not. But unless we hear



from them, we have to be ready to act, all by ourselves. I hope there's no need for that." His gaze scanned the room. "Now does anybody have a really good idea, here?"

Silence; then Dacia said, "There aren't any. Except to wait."

No one contradicted her. Ivan smacked one fist into his other palm. "Then let's do the waiting up in Control. I've been too long away from there." Going upship, his pace ran him short of breath.

In Control the screens showed him nothing new. The watchdog still sat in synchronous orbit; another Tsa ship crossed below it. He turned to Crowfoot. "The pattern still holding?"

The man nodded. "No change. I'd have called you."

"Right. And thanks." Crowfoot moved over; Ivan took the primary control seat. Again he checked the scout's frequencies; a coded tape was sending, and no response came. He bit his lip, and told himself once more that worry wasn't going to help anything.

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Dacia's cry brought his attention back to the screen. "The synchronous ship. It's moving!"

Squinting, Ivan tried to evaluate the blip's drift. Outside, day neared to dusk, but the screen was not affected. Checking his chronometer, Ivan estimated the next pass of the Tsa orbital patrol. Soon. And coming down, maybe? It came into view, and he was right. "Dacia! Get *everybody* in the cocoons, for acceleration. Anders, first bring out my gee-suit; if I have to fly this kite out through the roof, it might be kind of nice to survive." *Babbling.* Ivan shook his head. He checked the screen; as yet, the ships' approach was slow.

Dacia said, "I have Alina and Ellalee propping the cocoons."

"Good." But what if-? Ivan changed his mind. "Make it full plug-ins, all around."

"For freeze?"

"Just in case, Dacia. *All* the options." He saw her shrug and turn away, and wished his hunch were solid enough to explain.

After she helped him with the gee-suit, she went below. Still tasting her kiss, Ivan strapped solidly into the main control seat and watched the Tsa ships descend. He waited.

No place to go but up; the only questions were how and when. In the control room Ivan sat alone; everyone else was below, being tucked into an acceleration/freeze cocoon or else doing the tucking. Eventually Dacia called. "All secured but me; give me three minutes." He acknowledged, and waited that time out, and a little more.

More comfortable than he had expected, still the gee-suit hampered movement and vision; he really didn't like it much, though he was grateful for Dacia's help in adjusting it. At the moment, though, he felt more lonely than grateful. Once more he tried to call Tregare, and again got no response.

On screen the Tsa ships still came. Ivan gave a ragged sigh. He could do it or he couldn't, and either way, the time was now. His voice said, "I got Ozzie Newhausen, didn't I?" But the saying gave no comfort; that crisis was long past and not the same. "Rissa?" he murmured. "This time we can't say goodbye."

Left hand on his centralized gunnery hookup, Ivan used his right to put the *Deux* into liftoff. Not at the normal red-line limit. Not this time. At full-out max, the *Deux* went up.

Even in the gee-suit, pressure had him close to blackout. He couldn't risk it; his too-heavy hand cut the power back a notch,

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then another. For if he had to turn ship, he'd need some margin.

More awake now, he noticed something *eise-Inconnu Deux*, the whole mass of it, was rasping with vibration. Should he cut power further? No; he shook his head. Or tried to; his neck didn't seem to care for the idea. But plowing air under this kind of accel, he decided, would make *any* ship shake your teeth loose.

Above, coming nearly on a head-to-head course, the Tsa watchdog ship was closing. From the side, slanting, faster but not yet so near, came the other one. Ivan's jaw clenched; for the first ship his projector range would be right, within seconds now. Turning the *Deux* directly toward it, he fired a missile-and wasn't



surprised when the Tsa projectors picked it off at a safe distance. Then, all seven turrets aimed line-of-flight, he set heterodyne for peak heat, and fired.

Two seconds, three, he held the switch down-and in the suddenly black sky the Tsa ship bloomed like fireworks. *Out of atmosphere now!* Switch off, he swung ship to miss the wreckage. One down...

Then the pain licked at him, ebbed and came again-worse than back on groundside! One last, pre-planned order his muscles executed; the last thing he felt, that was not pain, was the power lever moving to its final notch.

When he could next see and move, Ivan eased the power back. Three notches-but even out of atmosphere, the *Deux* still shook. He checked the chronometer; this time he'd blacked out for less than two minutes. Extra accel got him out of range fast? Must be. His rear screen showed the other ship following, but losing ground. The planet looked larger than he would have expected by now, but as he watched, it shrank visibly in perspective.

He wasn't home free. The Tsa had three other ships-and sure enough, here came two of them. One from either side, higher than on their patrol beats and with better speed, too.

Automatically he shook his head again. His neck allowed it, this time, but he paid in stabbing ache. No time to coddle himself-the trick was, don't let both those ships near him at once, if he could help it. Gauging distance, he upped power a notch and turned *Inconnu Deux* toward the nearest Tsa, to pass behind it. But as he expected, it slowed and began to turn, also. "All right, you brainburners! Let's see you figure *this* move."

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He adjusted his projectors' heterodyne; the three seconds of firing would have drifted it some. On the controls he separated the six peripheral turrets from the central one, and set them for coordinated traverse within their mutual limits.

Still outside effective range, Ivan put his central turret on continuous fire, fishtailing the *Deux* to flick the beam toward the Tsa ship and then away again, so he could menace it while still holding course to clear it safely. Meanwhile he tried another missile. He didn't expect a hit and didn't get one, but a little confusion couldn't hurt.

He was wasting heterodyne but he didn't care; the Tsa wouldn't know his beam had lost peak heat capacity, and they'd think-well, with luck, maybe what he *hoped* they'd think.

Range closing-so before their weapon could reach him, *make the move*. Grinning, snarling, at the first touch of pain Ivan screamed like a banshee-not from hurt, but a war cry. Holding course to pass the Tsa ship at one side, he cut the central projector, fired the other six and traversed them to meet that ship.

Twice it bloomed fire-first the air of it and then, a greater burst, the ship's drive. Concentrating now, to get the *Deux* safely past the molten debris, Ivan lost track of his other foe. When the pain struck, it broke his barriers totally. He needed full-max accel but couldn't see the switch, or feel what his hands did. He *willed* to do it right, and now he screamed because he couldn't stop. Finally he didn't hear it any more.

Ivan woke to agony and darkness. For a time he lay back, first merely trying to stay conscious, then working through the exercises of breathing and nervous system, that he had learned at Erika Hulzein's. And when he could stop groaning, then he could think.

The lights out? Even the emergency backups, and the control panel indicators? But with no power at all, the air wouldn't circulate. And certainly the vessel wouldn't be vibrating to the high acceleration that held him flat.

With great effort he reached to feel over the control panel, seeking by touch to get some clues to the ship's condition. With care, identifying each switch before he moved it, he began a slow, halting checkout procedure. At first he didn't learn much.

He hadn't managed full-max accel; that lever still sat three notches back. No need, now, to spend fuel at such a rate; gently

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he notched back until he heard the "sping" of the red-line clip, then backed off two more, just for luck.



He touched a switch and, for a moment, couldn't recall its function. Then the memory came; it was an added frill that was seldom used, though it had seemed like a good idea in theory. But right now he could use it—he pressed, and a voice-tape from the ship's chronometer announced the current date-time group.

Nearly three days, I was out! Two thoughts came, then. One, it was a flaming miracle he hadn't fouled himself with excrement; that one set him to clawing free of the gee-suit and then feeling his way to the nearest latrine. His relief was considerable. While he sat, the protoplasmic computer in his mind considered the other idea, taking time and acceleration, and rendering them to him in terms of velocity and distance. When he had the figures, he whistled. In the small booth, the sound rang.

"At *that* accel we passed light in hours, not days." In the darkness, speaking aloud made him feel less lonely. "We must be—" He shook his head; the movement sent dim green glows across the black of his vision. For seconds he thought the backup lights had flickered, then realized the phenomenon was internal.

He went, slowly and sometimes bumping into things, back to his control seat. Now he ignored switches that gave only visual response. Memory clearing faster now, he found the detector indicators; as expected, the sub-light instruments gave no bleeps. He tried the gravities, and the gentle sounds told him there were stars out there, all right—and none dangerously close. So the *Deux* was well above C. How far above? Since there was no way to get audible confirmation of his own guess, he'd have to stand on it, as is.

Tregare's plan-to go a week maybe, before cutting Hoyfarul Drive and starting turnaround—should he stay with it, now? Ivan scratched his head. Maybe, for this, he needed to talk with someone.

He fumbled at the controls for the acceleration cocoons; when he found them, he paused. *This one?* Something was wrong—or was it? He thought again, and was certain. He knew that under Tsa attack he'd failed to get accel up to full-max. And what his hand had done, instead—that switch had put the whole snip's force into freeze!

He was halfway downship—and still without lights—before he wondered what he was going to do, anyway. He knew

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resuscitation procedures, of course; all officers did. But in the dark? He stopped, holding the railing for balance, and thought, "Three days. A little less, really. Just turning the thing off, waiting for the signal and opening the cocoon, should do it." *If I'm lucky.*

Inside the compartment, feeling his way among the cocoon positions, he had to face the next question. *Who?* Since he knew the assigned location of only one person, he had two choices. Someone at random—or Dacia. *How bad is the risk? I wish I knew.*

He chose Dacia. Because, he told himself, she was the freeze expert; if she came through all right, everyone's chances were better. But his real reason, he knew, was that he needed her.

He checked thoroughly, counting his way row by row, leaving his keys on the selected cocoon and then counting rows to the back wall and to the ones on either side. Until he was sure he was right. He pulled down the small seating-shelf that made the control assemblies easier to work with, and sat, and groped among the switches. He needed only to turn the thing off and let it cycle down; he moved, and the switch made the proper click. Now there'd be an hour or so before the cocoon announced, with a blinking light and audible tone, its readiness to be opened.

Might as well spend the time up in Control. He might learn something. But he didn't expect to enjoy that learning.

Back upship he sat at his console, fingering switches and occasionally trying one. Nothing new, and Ivan had used up all his ideas. Except for one, and the result of that one could kill all hope.

But finally he had to test it; he couldn't hide forever. He pulled up the right-hand arm of his seat. More than not, he hoped to find the small compartment empty. Occasionally Tregare smoked a cigar, but so seldom that he didn't carry a lighter. He kept one here, though, and one in his work desk. Ivan reached, and there it was.

Holding it in front of him, his arm bent slightly, Ivan pushed the operating stud. No light; maybe the thing was out of energy. *Quit kidding yourself!* His other forefinger reached and felt the heat.



Well, now you know! Cursing at the slight bum, mumbling past the finger he sucked to soothe the scorch, helped ease the pain of knowing.

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The chronometer's voice-tape was blithe and perky. Though Ivan waited, each time, as long before consulting it as he could manage, he got decidedly tired of its perkiness. When finally it told him his hour's wait was nearly over, he stood and made his way again downship. He felt his way past the cocoons and found his keys. He sat, and while he waited, made sure of the next control he needed. When the tone sounded-and of course the damned light would be blinking, too-Ivan's breath was not steady.

Here it goes. He moved the switch that would let the cocoon open. It made the right sound-which was to say, the tone stopped. He put his hands to the lid, not to hold it but to feel it move, and at first he thought it wasn't working, but then it began to lift. Not quickly-never fast, these devices-but not hesitating, once begun.

When it was up all the way, Ivan stood and reached into the open tank, fingers outspread to find Dacia but cautious of the connections that needed care to terminate.

Brushing past her hair, he touched her face. Cool but not chill; her throat had a good pulse and he heard breathing. A little slow, in the normal range for sleep. He stroked her cheek and squeezed one hand, waiting. Her head moved; her lips touched his hand. "Dacia?"

"Mmrn. Yuh-Ivan?" Her head raised, then fell back.

"Dacia. Lie still; don't move. Stay as you are, until you're all the way awake. Because-I'm sorry, but I can't help you; you'll have to make all the disconnects yourself. So wait; wait, Dacia-"

He talked on, pausing only now and then, until he knew she heard and understood. Finally she said, "All right, Ivan. But why?"

He knew what she meant, sure. But for a time he couldn't say it. Then he did. "Because there's no light."

She didn't understand immediately; then she gasped, and he felt her sit up and try to hug him. "Dacia! The connections-"

"It's all right; I didn't break any. But, *Ivan!*"

Gently he pulled her hands free of him. "You'd better see to yourself first. And be careful." When she was done, and had climbed out-he reached to help, but fumbled and was no use at all, that he could tell-they stood and hugged properly.

"Ivan-you can't see *anything!*" He shook his head, and felt tears leaking from his useless eyes.

XI. Lisele

Lying on something hard, feet

higher than her head, Lisele came awake. Her throat hurt. Staring upward, she wasn't sure where she was. Then she looked to one side-and seeing from that angle, began to recognize things. The control room was tipped over, was ail-so the whole scout was, too.

She tried getting up, and found she could. Tipping her head back she looked at the seats above her; from one, Stonzai hung by her harness. From the alien's mouth fell a drop of blood, then another.

"Lisele! You're all right?" Tregare's voice. She turned and saw him lying across the control panel, level with her eyes. Gasping, she spoke his name, then said, "Yes. I think so."

She'd have to climb up to him. His foot stuck over the edge; she reached for it. "No!" Startled, she pulled her hand back. Gently, he said, "The leg's broken; touching the foot wouldn't be a good idea. Can you climb some other way?"

She looked. "Sure." She reached for her mother's harness, hanging from the seat, and pulled herself up. Then, stepping across to the control panel, careful not to step where she shouldn't, she squatted beside her father. "Those Tsa crashed us, didn't they? Can you fix it?"

Once, falling out of a tree, Lisele had broken her arm; she remembered how it felt. But if Tregare was tightened up with the hurt of his leg, she couldn't tell it. He said, "Fix the scout, you mean? To lift-off again?" She nodded. "I can't think how. The scout itself won't be hurt much-but we're tipped over. And out here with no



equipment, that's a lot of kilos to hoist." He shook his head. "Our best bet is to yell for help, to get us out of here. If we can raise anybody. Then, if it seems worth it, come back

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and clear a landing pad. A ship's crane, that's what it takes to roust this baby up again."

She frowned. "If we can raise anybody? Why couldn't we?"

"Well, we don't know yet, how Ivan made out with that Tsa fleet. Or the Shrakken, for that matter. So--"

"But what if we *can't* get help?"

Now in his face she saw the tension, but all he said was, "Then, princess, we'll just have to think of something else."

Sitting at the edge where she could hang her feet over, she considered what he said. She heard a noise and looked up to see her mother climbing down through the deck hatch. "Lisele!" Rissa dropped what she was carrying, and came down fast; for a moment they held each other. "Thank peace you are not injured." But Rissa's hand, touching her throat, brought pain.

"Ow! I remember now; I was choking. What-?"

"Your mother got you down," Tregare said. "Good job, too-I couldn't have." Then, staying clear of the hurt leg, she and Rissa were over by Tregare, all talking at once, and hugging.

Finally Rissa said, 'I should report. I have freed those in the accel bunks, and we have laid the pads on the bulkhead where they can be of use. Sevshen is still unconscious-as I note Stonzai is, also. I detect no serious physical damage to either, but-' She shrugged. "Mental injury? We can only wait and see."

Now Rissa looked as if something hurt. "Hagen Trent is only bruised. But Jenise-" Shuddering, she said, "When we struck, somehow her left hand had slipped between the inner and outer frames of her bunk. Bran-the wrist, and more-crushed."

Inhaling, Tregare's breath whistled. "What's been done for it?"

"Not enough. I stanchied the bleeding and operated the transfusion kit. Then Trent took over, and began sewing tendons back together. But the *bones*-like assembling a puzzle, with pieces missing!"

Tregare patted his wife's shoulder. "Yeah-no fun. I had to try to do something like that, myself, once."

"Is there anything you have not done?" Now, at least, Rissa could smile-though not, in Lisele's view, very well. "At any rate-I plundered a lifeboat kit for organic bone cement, enough anti-infectant to obviate extreme sanitary precautions, and surgical tools. And of course we put Jenise out of pain. Not out of consciousness-we needed her cooperation, her reactions."

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But having to watch us deal with that mangled wrist-" Her face twisted. "She cried so much!"

Feeling a little sick, Lisele still had to know. "But what did you *do!*"

Rissa ruffled her daughter's hair. "We tried to put together those shattered fragments of bone; there was not enough left, to do it right. Not without a real surgeon and a kit of plastic laminate."

"How did you leave it?" said Tregare. "What's the prognosis?"

Rissa shook her head. "Even if she does not lose the hand, it will retain little function. As of now the mangled parts are covered, with synthetic dermis filling the gaps in the remaining skin. We determined size and contour for the flexicast; when I left, he was fitting it. The fingers will protrude slightly; if they turn color, of course, the hand comes off." She sighed. "At least Hagen has volunteered for that chore, if it is necessary."

She freed herself from Lisele's embrace and Tregare's, and retrieved the bundle she had dropped earlier. "We are not doing things in proper order. Here, Bran, is the flexicast kit for your leg. That, at least, I do know how to use. And first, of course, before setting the fracture, the injection to free you of pain."

Tregare sighed. "I was hoping you'd get around to that part, pretty soon."



The setting didn't work; Rissa couldn't apply the flexicast and keep the broken ends in place at the same time, and Lisele simply wasn't strong enough to hold traction by herself. So Rissa sent her to fetch Hagen Trent. "-when he's free to come, of course."

Not as sore or stiff as she'd been a short time earlier, Lisele climbed to the deck hatch. Passing Stonzai, she saw the Shrakken's eyes were open, and called the news down to Rissa. "We'll get you out of there in a minute," Lisele said, and went to look through the hatch opening.

What she saw, relieved her. Sitting up, Sevshen drank from a cup Hagen Trent held. And Jenise Rorvik lay breathing evenly-either asleep or doped out.

Trent looked around. "How's Tregare's leg? Need any help?"

"Yes. We do need help. Can you come now?" As he followed her down, she looked back and saw Sevshen coming, also. Moving not too well, but being careful, at least. At Stonzai's level he paused; the two Shrakken spoke in their own language, and began fumbling at the harness that held Stonzai.

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"Wait!" Lisele gestured at them. "You'll fall, if-" She shook her head. "In a minute, Hagen can do it." So Stonzai stopped trying, and pushed Sevshen's hands away, too. Lisele went on down to where Tregare lay.

Trent and Rissa talked for a moment; he put traction to Tregare's leg and she felt for the broken part, pushed a little and then nodded. "This is correct; hold steady, please." Face sweating, Tregare grunted as she wrapped the sheath-several layers- and sealed it. "There!" she said. "Now, Bran, we can get you off this uncomfortable roost."

And when he was down, seated on a purloined cushion and leaning against the bulkhead, Rissa and Trent climbed up and freed Stonzai.

The Shrakken said only, "Trouble, we have. But loose of those straps to be, good is."

The first thing, Tregare said, was that no matter what worked out later, certainly they'd all be in the scout for a while. So Lisele and the rest of the able-bodied went back to the bunkroom and took loose the rest of the accel pads, to make more comfortable beds. They carried some down to Control, too, and arranged them so Lisele could sleep at one side of the console that now lay flat on its back, and Rissa and Tregare on the other.

Moving under his own power, Tregare edged over to his new bed and stretched out. "Not half bad. Thanks." Then his face took on an expression Lisele knew, the one that meant he was planning ahead. "Rissa? You want to check the control panel and see if it's got any news for us?"

Rissa seemed preoccupied, but she nodded. "I am afraid I have allowed myself to fail into worry about the *Deux*-and our little Renalle aboard. But first things first, as you say. And I agree that at this stage we need outside data." She climbed to perch on hands and knees over the console, and began to check the indicators and call out the results.

"Drive is operative-were we not pointed into the planet itself."

"Lucky, there," Tregare said. "It could've blown."

"But it did not. Power reserves, fuel, near full capacity. Comm gear in working condition, but no incoming signals, because-"

"Yeah," Tregare put in. "Antennas retracted. Unretract?"

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Rissa moved switches, turned a dial, then scowled and shook her head. "They are jammed; they do not move."

"Plowed into the dirt, you think?"

"Probably. When I apply power, the servos overheat and disconnect."

Tregare shrugged. "Well, skip it. What else is on the board?"

Straightening, balanced on knees and shins, Rissa shook back her loose hair, then bent forward again. A viewscreen lit, and Lisele saw a dim picture: dense growth of trees, afternoon light reflecting on water. Rissa sighed. "Not the best of luck, eh, Bran?"

Lisele didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

Tregare's laugh came harsh. "Jungle, I was braced for. What we're down in, though, is *swamp*."



Tregare had no more interest in the control board's information, and showed it, but Rissa stayed where she was and read off what she found. Finally she said, "That is all," and jumped down, knees bending as she landed. She turned to Tregare. "Now, until something new occurs, I am done with that uncomfortable position. Another thing, though-how long since any of us has eaten?"

Shaking his head, Tregare grinned, and Rissa said, "Our mini-galley now sits at the upper far corner of this space-and on its side, too." She looked across to Trent. "Hagen, if you will get a tool kit from under the console, perhaps you can take loose one of the cooking units and remount it-" She scanned the place, and shrugged. "-oh, in some way that it can be used."

Trent chuckled. "Right side up, you mean. Sure; I'll try." As he rummaged for the tool kit, Lisele followed Rissa's climb to the small galley, and helped sort the food packets her mother handed out from the upended cabinets. Trent's relocation job, when he finished it, looked pretty slapdash-but it worked, and after a time, everyone was fed. Except Jenise Rorvik-Rissa carried food up to her, but the injured woman wasn't awake yet.

Even fed, Tregare was restless. "There's still daylight left," he said. "Rissa, couldn't you and Trent take a quick look around, outside, before it's dark? Give us some idea what we're up against, out there?" He moved a hand. "No big safari-just a quick scan."

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Rissa nodded. "Of course. To reduce our uncertainties. Hagen?"

The man agreed, and then Lisele knew she wanted to do something, too. "Can I go with you? I'll be careful."

After a moment, Tregare said, "You both watch out for her, though. All right?"

So Lisele-feeling as much scared as important, but the other way around, too-went with Trent and Rissa. The man had a needlegun at his belt, and Rissa a holstered energy weapon. Climbing first up and then down, walking the side walls of staircases and bent over because the stairs were built so narrow, Lisele followed them to the airlock.

At first it wouldn't open. Rissa frowned, tapped the pressure gauge and punched the override button. Noise came, a groaning shudder and with it a burnt smell; then the airlock door, lying on a slant now, gave two feeble jerks and slid partway open. Through the lower third of the opening oozed thick, grey mud topped with a layer of green slime. It smelled pretty bad, but Lisele gulped and kept her dinner down.

Rissa and Trent looked as if the stink had got to them, too. Lisele said, "Are we still going outside?"

Both hands busy with her long dark hair, tying it up around her head, Rissa Kerguelen said, "I am, because I told Tregare that I would. You need not; it might prove dangerous. If-"

"I told you I'll be careful."

Face relaxing, Rissa squeezed Lisele's shoulder. "Of course. Come with us, then." Together, all three waded out through the mud.

Outside, a breeze blew, so the stink wasn't too bad. The heat was, though. A little away from the scout, which lay with its nose buried in mud as Tregare had guessed, was some solid ground; they waded over to it and scrambled up. Lisele had mud most of the way up her legs; the others, taller, hadn't quite so much.

It wasn't a good place for walking. There was more mud and water, as far as Lisele could see, than solid groundside. But Rissa squinted against the low sunlight, and pointed. "There, just under the water. A kind of path, I think."

The man bent and looked. "I don't see it. What do you mean?"

Rissa's smile didn't look very relaxed. "It is a thing I have seen, in swamps, on another world I have visited. Under a little

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water, when that water comes and goes with time, animal trails retain their firmness and can be utilized." She turned, "Briefly, only, for this day, let us explore." And she began wading again. It was fun at first, following Rissa and hearing Trent slosh along behind. With the sun at the horizon to one side, the slanting light outlined everything Lisele saw. But then, almost like someone ducking under water, the sun went away-



leaving only sky glow, grey water, and a whitish moon that hung low where the sun had gone. Lisele faltered. "Are we going much farther?"

Ahead, Rissa turned and came back. "No. In fact we had best move quickly, while the light holds." In passing she gave Lisele a quick handclasp; in turn the two moved past Hagen Trent, who again brought up the rear. Slower now, they moved along the underwater path.

Squinting ahead in the dim light, Lisele looked for the scoutship-tipped over or not, it was still *home*. For a long time she couldn't see it, and peering ahead so much, twice she missed her step and floundered in mud to her waist before someone caught her wrist and pulled her up again. Feeling ashamed, each time she said, "Sorry. Thanks," and made up her mind to watch closer.

But she didn't see the thing leap out of the water. From her left came a big splash that knocked her down, then the huge grey beast loomed-but it fell short, and made a greater splash. When she stood and could breathe again, snorting water out, she saw only the splash-waves spreading.

Only Trent had kept his feet; now he put away his unfired gun and helped Rissa up. Sputtering, mud-covered, she tried to wipe slime from her face. Her hair hung sodden, clotted with mud. She spit out swamp water, and said, "Thanks, Trent. What was that creature?"

Lisele, fingers trying to comb mud from her own hair, shook her head. Hagen Trent said, "It's like nothing I ever heard of. Big, certainly-I'd guess three meters long and a half-meter thick-" He raised his brows and Rissa nodded. "What I thought I saw, in this dim light-hadn't we better get moving again?" Rissa turned and began walking; the others followed. Lisele spoke. "What *did* you see?" Trent hesitated. "Only an instant, I saw it head-on. I expected a huge gaping maw, lots of teeth. But instead there were-I *think* there were-a lot of sucker mouths, all grouped at the snout."

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Over her shoulder, Rissa said, "It is some sort of huge leech?"
"In its way of feeding, yes. If the light didn't fool me." Even in the heat, Lisele shivered. Walking, careful to follow Rissa exactly, she peered from side to side. But no monster appeared, and soon they reached the scout.

In the airlock, standing above the intruding water, they tried to get some of the mud off themselves. The stuff hardened quickly, to a damp rubbery toughness that clung. She could work lumps of it loose, Lisele found, but still a thin layer coated her skin.

And as it dried, it began to make her itch.

Pulling at the heavy globs caught in her hair, Rissa muttered a curse. Lisele said, "What's the matter? The mud'll wash out."

Rissa gave a snort. "Wash out? How? The shower is horizontal, with the drain halfway up one wall." She shrugged. "Oh, we will improvise something-but it will take some thought, to do so in a way that will still conserve our water." Now Rissa sighed. "And each extra effort we must make, to cope with these conditions, slows our real task-which is to get ourselves out of this place." Rissa started toward the control cabin. Following, Lisele didn't say anything.

First they told Tregare what the outside was like, and about the water beast. Lisele mentioned the white moon, and Tregare said, "If it's the synchronous one, we can sight on it and fix our location."

Then they talked about the mud.

The shower wasn't too much of a problem; with the stall's door now on top, they didn't have to do any cutting or welding. Tregare had the answer to draining and recycling; Rissa arranged a spare fuel pump unit and some hose, from emergency stock, to suck water from the stall's bottom corner into the drain. Hagen Trent wired power to the pump, and broke a thumbnail getting the drain's grill out so the hose could go in past the first bend that pointed down.

Still, the result wasn't a total success. Even pointing the spray up pretty well, people had to squat or kneel or go on hands and knees to use it. Scrubbing wasn't easy, unless someone else was there to help, and the mud took a lot of scrubbing. Even on skin, let alone trying to get it out of hair.

Kneeling, Rissa worked at Lisele's hair-painfully, but

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hearing Rissa mutter, Lisele didn't feel like complaining. Finally Rissa said, "Oh, this is



impossible!" and turned the water off. Not bothering to dry, Rissa pawed through the jumble of a wall cabinet that lay on its side. She picked up, then discarded, a pair of scissors. "Altogether too much work." Next an electric trimmer; she pushed the button and the thing buzzed. Huning the adjustment dial, she motioned Lisele to sit. "We will not mind looking a little funny, will we? Because the mud will not allow us the luxury of looking any other way."

Following Rissa toward Control, Lisele thought that her mother's ears weren't really all that big. But with no hair to frame them, only stubble you could hardly see, they did seem to stand out a lot. She supposed her own ears did, too, now.

Seeing the two of them, Tregare's eyes went wide. "Peace take me-*why!*" He shook his head. "Couldn't you have just washed that gloop out?"

Rissa's voice held a sharp edge. "Over a matter of hours, perhaps. And how many times, working outdoors in that slippery mess, would we need to repeat the tiresome process? Saying nothing, as yet, of the problem if we must leave here and travel on foot."

Tregare looked stubborn. "A plastic hood, you could wear."

"Not in the heat of day. Even clothing may be too much. No." Her eyes narrowed. "Bran, I do not make decisions lightly."

Tregare and Rissa hardly ever got mad at each other; now they were, and Lisele didn't like it. Quickly she said what Rissa had told her about looking funny, and the luxury part, and all. "I don't mind looking funny," she finished, "so what's so important?"

Tregare glowered, and at first she thought he was going to say something loud, but then the expression broke. "All right, princess. Rissa, you win." He touched his own black, curly hair. "And I guess the rest of us need shearing, too, to work outside any."

"It would appear so." Rissa's voice still sounded chilly.

"Okay," said Tregare. "I'm at a disadvantage, though." Lisele waited, and he said, "You two, you have pretty-shaped skulls. Me, though-I remember from my year as a snotty, at the Slaughterhouse." He meant, Lisele knew, UET's old Space Academy.

"I had the lumpiest head in the whole peace-forsaken place!"

Rissa and Tregare didn't stay sore at each other, because that night when Lisele was barely asleep, from the far side of the console Rissa's cries woke her again. And they never did that

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unless they felt good together. So Lisele smiled, and as soon as things quieted again, she went back to sleep.

Next morning she woke to hear their voices. "-as worried as you are, Bran! Renalle, poor infant! How can she know why I do not come to her? But I cannot, so Ellalee will simply have to do her best. And at least, the child is weaned."

"Rissa-you sure this isn't bothering you, more than you let on?"

"*Of course* it is! But brooding on the matter will do no good, when there is so much else we must plan and do. So, please, Bran-" Then they were quiet, and pretty soon it was time to get up and eat.

A little later, Lisele went outside with Rissa and Trent and the two Shrakken, to have a better look at how the scoutship lay. What with the mud and heat, they didn't wear any clothes except foot-protectors. Hagen Trent's head wasn't sheared; he said that while they stayed with the scout, he got to keep what was left of his hair until it came up full of mud. "And it's not fair to trip me!" Hairless by nature, the Shrakken didn't have the problem.

Mud covered most of the scoutship's nose. "The projector turret," Rissa said, "must be nearly two meters under," and Trent nodded. "But the antenna systems-how far buried?" Leaving the Shrakken to probe that area, the two went back inside. Lisele, standing on a solid hummock, studied the swamp around her. She stood in shade; even early in the day, the sun shone hot.

The trees looked strange. The smaller ones grew straight up from mud or water, the trunks rising several meters before branching. She noticed something; there were three branches, or five, or seven. Always an odd number, always slanting steeply upward. And there the main trunk stopped; above, each branch divided in



the same way. She thought about it, then shrugged; a *lot* of things happened, that she didn't understand, that made no difference either way.

The leaves weren't anything special; if she'd seen them on Earth she wouldn't have noticed they hadn't grown there. But the trunks-as a tree grew bigger, it put out branching roots from above the water, down into the swamp. Then-looking around, she could see the various stages-the original, central root dwindled and rotted away. The biggest trees stood on spider legs, with nothing under the main trunk.

She ought to make notes, she thought-this stuff might be

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good for a term paper when she got back to the Junior U. But she didn't have anything with her, to write on.

Rissa and Trent came outside again. Each carried a crude shovel, and on the tools Lisele saw fresh weld marks. "You made those, just now?"

Smiling, Trent nodded. "Rissa said we need some digging done, so I roused material out from ship's stock and took the torch to it." He held his shovel up. "Like it? Want to do some digging?"

Lisele shook her head. "Too heavy for me, looks like."

Rissa went over and spoke to Stonzai and Sevshen, who were cautiously pawing mud away from one area of the scout's nose. She gave Stonzai her shovel, and Trent handed his to Sevshen. Still carefully, the two Shrakken began to dig. "Now," said Rissa, "let us appraise the lie of this- vessel, how it balances." One hand touching the scout's hull, she picked her way among the hummocks, back from the airlock toward the drive nodes. Trent and Lisele followed.

About halfway, Rissa paused and pointed. "Close, this, to our center of gravity-the pivot point. And note the crushed and splintered wood, quite a mass of it, protruding from under the scout, just forward of us. It might be possible-" Then she moved on.

Trying to hurry, Lisele slipped, and scrambled up out of the mud. "What might be possible?"

Trent reached to catch her before she slipped again. "To tilt the scout, Lisele. Enough to free the nose and extend the antennas. Or maybe-no, I'm not that much of a mindreader."

At the scout's tail, Rissa stopped and the other two caught up. This end was a good three meters above ground or water- partly due to the hull's taper. "This section, though," said Rissa, "is the heavier." Trent seemed to know what she was talking about, so Lisele kept quiet. "But already the drive fills most of it. What else could be moved back? Or unloaded altogether?"

Trent frowned. "If you'd tell me just what you're planning, maybe I could help." She didn't speak; he touched her shoulder. "Come on, say it-what is it you're thinking to dare?"

Lisele saw her mother relax. "Why, perhaps merely to free the nose, so we could call for help without rigging new antennas in the trees. Or possibly-if we could get even a slight upward tilt-" Her breath came shuddering. "There is a chance that I could lift us."

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She shrugged. "Or, of course, kill us all in the trying." And Lisele wondered how her mother's face, her strange new face that no longer stopped at the forehead, could look so calm while she said those words.

Near sun's noon they all went inside. Without the complications of clothes or hair, cleaning up didn't take so long; then, clothed except for the Shrakken, everybody gathered in Control. Trent had installed a cooking unit down near the control console and Rissa had stocked some food there; now Tregare, up and about on plastic crutches, surprised them with lunch cooked and ready. Her father, Lisele thought, wasn't the greatest cook she knew-but still she had seconds.

Rissa had made coffee; Lisele got up to pour it, remembering that Stoiszai liked coffee but Sevshen refused to sample it. Then she sat again, as Tregare said, "Well, Rissa-how do our prospects look?"

Rissa looked up from her plate. "If we try to tilt the scout, there is a fulcrum of sorts, barely forward of our center of gravity. A mass of crushed timber. Not entirely solid, most likely, but-"

"Better than trying to pivot on a sea of mud," said Tregare.



"Yes." Rissa nodded. "My thought, now, is that a little planning may save much work, in affecting this vessel's balance. One kilo moved from nose to tail will have more effect than ten moved some short distance. And many things will be best off-loaded, since space behind is so limited."

"Yeah, right," Tregare said, scowling but not looking angry, and named some items that could be moved. "Hell of a job, with everything lying sideways. How's the digging going, by the way?"

Stonzai had begun climbing to the deck hatch; she paused, and motioned to Hagen Trent. He said, "Our Shrakken friends have been doing most of it, so far. No sign of the antennas yet. The trouble is, we know the two sets are 180° apart, and how far back, but nobody remembers their orientation-with respect to the airlock, say. I wish to hell we had some blueprints."

Tregare grinned. "We have them, all right. OB the *Deux*."

Loading a tray for Jenise Rorvik, Rissa turned to head off Trent's protest. "Aboard here we have the manuals and drawings needed to operate or repair this craft. Since scoutships normally function *above* the surface, it never occurred to anyone that we might need help in locating our own antenna systems."

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After a moment, he laughed. "Yes, of course. AH right, the word is dig. I think I'll go out and have a turn at it."

As he left, Rissa started up toward the deck hatch. She was having trouble, Lisele saw, climbing and balancing the tray at the same time. "Can I help?" And without waiting for an answer, Lisele scrambled up past her mother; from there, one climbed while the other held the tray. At the third exchange they reached the hatch.

Jenise Rorvik, lying with her injured arm across her chest, didn't look good. Her head moved slowly back and forth; her eyes stared upward. Rissa put a hand to the woman's forehead. "Feverish. Jenise.. .can you hear me?" At least the exposed fingers, sticking out the end of the cast, hadn't begun to turn dark.

Jenise blinked; her head stopped moving and her eyes seemed to focus. "I think I'm better. Hungry, even. If it didn't *hurt* so--"

Rissa checked the time. "Yes. You are overdue for an injection. Just a moment." The medical kit lay on the bulkhead, in a corner; from it, Rissa brought an ampoule and spray can. She sprayed Jenise's arm above the cast, and gave her the shot. Then, while Rissa fed the other woman, she told of their situation, and what they hoped to do about it.

Only then did Jenise register then- changed appearance. "Your hair! What happened?" Rissa explained, and Rorvik's good hand went to her own sweat-soaked hair. "I'm so *hot*-this fever. I'd be joining the fashion soon, anyway, I guess; why don't you do it now?" So Lisele fetched the trimmer and Rissa did the job quickly. One of Jenise's ears stuck out more than the other, but Lisele didn't mention it.

Then Rissa helped with the bedpan, and dumped it; as with the shower, the scout's position didn't make things easy. The latrine cubicle was now in a lower corner. Pretty soon, Rissa said, they'd have to take off the top wall and set the toilet upright. Meanwhile, with the pumps working and the lid tight, the thing could be drained without making a mess. The one off Control wasn't set so handily, but could be reached, all right, for bedpan dumping.

And for those who could go outside, about a hundred meters down the flooded path sat a handy log.

Starting to leave, Rissa turned back. "Jenise-how soon do you think we can move you? You should not be alone, and yet we can spare no one to stay with you."

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Rorvik hesitated, "With the shot fresh in me, I could almost take it right now." She moved a little, and winced. "No-not on a full stomach. But next time, maybe. Just so nobody drops me!"

"We shall be as careful as possible."

"Sure, I know." Jenise made an odd, lopsided smile. "Truth is, I'll be glad to be out of here. I know the Shrakken are our buddies, and I do like Stonzai, but they give me the willies." Her voice lowered. "Maybe I was delirious. But last night, those two got in the same bed-and Stonzai's the female, but I'd swear she was screwing Sevshen!" She looked at Lisele, and her good hand went to her mouth. "I'm sorry-I shouldn't-"

"Lisele knows about sex," Rissa said, "as much as she needs to know at this



time-and is not embarrassed by it. It has not always been feasible for her to be in a room separate from Tregare and myself." Lisele thought her mother sounded angry, a little, but her face didn't show anything. "And if she did not know, as apparently you do not, that with the Shrakken it is the female ovipositor that enters the male body, then it is time she learned."

Now Rissa frowned. "But Stonzai has only recently ovulated- and we have no host beasts at hand. I must ask her."

Suddenly Lisele knew what was wrong-but it wasn't, really. "No," she said. "Dacia found out; she talked with Stonzai a lot. They-" She struggled for the words, then nodded. "When they ovulate, it's all instinct, like animals in-rut?-yes, that's right. But between times they have sex just like people do."

"Well, not quite," said Jenise, but now she smiled.

"Very well," said Rissa. "At any rate, when you have had your next injection, Hagen Trent and I will undertake to move you down to Control. And your bed, also. You will have dinner with us."

"Fine." Hair or no hair, Lisele thought, Jenise looked a lot better than she had a little while ago. "One thing, though."

Rissa's brows raised. "Yes?"

"I need a bath; I don't like smelling me. But how-?"

"Indeed." Rissa nodded. "You can hardly utilize our horizontal shower. Nor can Tregare. We shall need some kind of bathtub-but where? One of the corridors, perhaps; there is no room in Control. Somewhere, at least, where hoses can reach to 100

provide water and drainage." She sighed. "I hope this scout stocks another pump in working condition."

Then she and Lisele did go down to Control, talked with Tregare about ways to rig a bathtub, and went groundside.

They found Trent and Sevshen shoveling mud away. Stonzai, with a slab of wood, pushed back the crest of the pile so it wouldn't ooze down again. All in all, Lisele saw, they'd moved quite a lot of gumbo, and to one side a growing hummock sat where a pond had been.

Trent looked up to greet them. He was mud all over, but it didn't mask his smile. "We found one antenna feed. A stub, rather; it's broken off. About a radian off the vertical, clockwise as you face upship. So the other feed's too far down to bother with."

Rissa's face took on the look of concentration. "The stub- what is its condition? Can we connect to it?"

Trent rubbed a muddy wrist across his brows; the result wasn't much improvement. "First we dig out some more; no point in trying to work too close to the ooze. Then I'll disconnect the broken part at the fittings, and hang an extension on, and spray a good seal against any mud that seeps back. Then-" He shrugged. "Tregare's the communications expert. I'll get with him, and try to scrounge up stuff to build antennas to his design."

He looked up. "We can hang it in one of these trees. I hope our instruments still tell direction right, lying slaunchwise."

"I would think so," said Rissa. "And now, if Stonzai will spell you at that shovel, shall we look closer and see if any reasonable amount of digging, behind our fulcrum, might let us tilt this scout?"

Lisele wanted to do something useful, but what was there? She watched Rissa and Trent move back along the scout, looked at the two Shrakken working against the mud, and turned away. She walked along the sunken path away from the little ship, careful to stay on the slippery ridge under the stinking ooze. Here the water was too shallow to hold monsters, so she felt safe. In the patches of sunlight the heat came like a blast from an oven; when she reached a patch of shade, she paused a moment.

She looked aside, toward the afternoon sun. In a tree she saw movement-but not what moved; the leaves gave too much cover. Whatever, it had to be pretty small.

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Exploring, on such a precarious route, wasn't much fun. Lisele sighed; might as well go back to the scout. Placing her feet carefully at every step, she began her return.

Suddenly, about twenty meters short of the scout's buried nose, under the water



Lisele saw a branching path. It went to the other side of the scoutship, away from the airlock. Might be nothing new to see there, either, but at least she could be the first to walk it. And maybe come all the way around the scout's tail, and surprise Rissa. Why not?

This trail, too, was slippery, but Lisele took care and didn't fall. She went nearly two-thirds of the scout's length, and there the path petered out. She squinted down into the water. Actually, she decided, the timber knocked down by their crash had torn out the path's ridge. So now what?

A tree was down, pushed over and slanting. With not too much of a jump she got onto it and began to climb its slope. Maybe there'd be a branch, back among the heavy leaves that smelled like some spice she couldn't quite name, that would let her get down to where the path started again. If it did. No harm, trying...

Off to the side, again she saw movement, and looked quickly, and decided it was bugs. Not quite like Earth insects, but not too different, either. Or bigger. One fell back and floundered, its three wings flailing; she grabbed it, to have a look. The small thing struggled while she stared at its color patterns-the orange and green and purple and...

It came to her that she could be stung or bitten; and with a gasp she tossed the bug free, and it flew away. Then she thought, *if it wanted to sting me, it had time to.* Behind bunched leaves, it vanished.

Until she heard the voices, Lisele didn't realize how high she'd climbed. "No, Hagen!" Looking down, she saw Trent hugging Rissa, who stood with one arm braced against the scout. "I said no."

The engineer breathed so hard, Lisele could hear it. "Why not? You and Tregare, you're not exclusive. And now that he's crippled--"

With a ragged laugh, Rissa pushed him away. "Now, perhaps he needs me even more. But the point is, I do not *want* you."

There was movement-Lisele couldn't tell just what

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happened-and Rissa said, "I do like you, Hagen. Let that be enough."

"Oh, no. Oh, no!" He reached to pull her to him; she said something Lisele didn't hear, and then-

Lisele wasn't sure how it went. Rissa turned her back on Hagen Trent, and then he was up off the ground, and Rissa turned again. And Trent flew out into the mud and landed on his face. He went almost under water but not quite; when he scrambled up, he was sputtering. "Peace take you, woman! I'll--"

Quite still, Rissa stood. "Please. No one is harmed."

Gradually, the man stopped shaking. "All right." He climbed out of swamp, back onto the path. "Are you going to tell Tregare?"

Rissa shrugged. "No, if you prefer. Though if I did- Tregare, you must understand, trusts me to make my own decisions."

The man sagged as if someone had hit him. "But what *I* want, how I feel, makes no damned difference."

Lisele saw her mother frown. "Not entirely true, that. But-*nobody*, Hagen Trent, commands Rissa Kerguelen against her will." As he turned away, Rissa added, "If you had spent eleven years in UET's Total Welfare, as I did, you would feel as I do."

Over his shoulder, Trent looked back. "Maybe so; I don't always understand you two-ages people who lived so long before I was even born." He shrugged. "I'm sorry, Rissa. This mess here-I guess I let it wiggle my mind too much." He faced her. "Can you still like me?" She nodded. "Then that *is* enough." Sloshing away, he turned at the scout's tail and went out of sight.

Until Lisele called down, "Mother?", Rissa stood looking after the man. Then she glanced up, and after a moment, laughed.

"I suppose you can clamber down safely?" She waited while Lisele worked her way down to the tree's trunk, then inched over and jumped down to the path. Landing, she braced hands against the scout and avoided slipping. Then Rissa came to hug her. "And how much, my daughter, did you observe? And what do you think about it?"

Lisele looked up. "You told him to leave you alone and then you made him do it." She made a face. "Some people sure have to learn things the hard way. I didn't think he'd be like that."



After a pause, Rissa said, "Basically, Hagen is a good person. The circumstances here-he got a bit overwrought." Lisele thought for a few seconds, and then nodded.

They sloshed their way around the back of the scout-past a gap where Lisele waded waist high through murky water-and toward the airlock. Rissa gestured. "This section is bedded solidly. Digging, to tilt the ship, would be a forbidding task. Let us hope we do not have to try."

"You think we can call for help, then, and somebody will come?"

"As matters stand, that possibility is our best chance."

Past the airlock, they reached the digging site. Stonzai tossed a shovel of mud, then stuck the tool in the ground. "I think, enough is." And Sevshen laid down his own shovel.

Looking at the exposed antenna fitting, Rissa said, "You are right. Once Hagen fits a new connection and seals it, ooze should do no harm." She suggested a break, and they all headed for the airlock.

Inside, Tregare and Hagen Trent were talking; the engineer had bathed, and was now clipped near-bald. On a folding table he was fitting pieces of apparatus together. "Today I'll install and seal the new signal-feeds. Tomorrow-" He gestured toward a rough drawing. "Tomorrow, Tregare, I'll scrounge up parts and start building an antenna array to this design of yours." Then, seeming quite at ease, he greeted Rissa and the rest.

Rissa and Lisele went up to the horizontal shower; after the two Shrakken were done with it, they washed clean of mud and slime. Jenise was awake when they looked in on her; for a few minutes they visited. Returning to Control they found Tregare alone. "Hagen's out rigging the new feed; should be back, pretty soon." His smile, then, looked a little smug. "Meanwhile I think I've figured the easiest way to fix us a bathtub."

It was simple; when Rissa saw it, she laughed. At the right of Control was a closet, only a few decimeters above the bulkhead now serving as deck, and the closet held a working sink. "We take the door off," said Tregare. "The closet's solid metal, leakproof, so we get the junk out and rig a pump for drainage, and we're in business."

Trent came in and reported the new antenna feed shipshape. He wasn't too muddy; soon he and Rissa and the two Shrakken emptied the closet and dismantled the door, which they laid across two folding tables as a workbench. "Could double as

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dinner table, too," Tregare said, "if we take some of those seats loose from the deck and bring 'em down here." But that job had to wait; people were hungry. First, Trent and Rissa brought Jenise Rorvik down to Control; Lisele and Sevshen carried the accel pads down, and Jenise's bed was laid out alongside Lisele's.

Then they ate. Lisele was getting a little tired of Tregare's cooking, but she didn't think she'd better say so.

Later, Jenise and then Tregare tried out the new bathtub. Rissa hadn't located another spare pump yet, so Trent swung the sink to a vertical position, and drainage was bailing with a bucket and using towels to sop up the last of the water.

That job was slow but not really difficult. The hard part, earlier, was someone having to stand and hold Jenise's arm, then later Tregare's leg, clear of the water. "We'll have to put up hooks," Tregare said, "so we can hang slings to support us cripples."

Then they all sat around and talked, sipping brandy-except for Lisele, who had a small glass of wine. It made her sleepy; as soon as she finished it, she went to bed. And even with the lights and the talk, almost at once she felt herself dozing off.

Thinking, *at least we're getting a start made. . .*



For a time, not long, Dacia cried against Ivan's chest. Then she sat up, and he heard her sniffing the tears away. When she spoke, her voice was steady. "How long has it been?" "In freeze, you mean? Three days, nearly." She gasped. "Why did you leave me in there so long?" Almost but not quite, he had to laugh. "Because until just about two hours ago, I was still knocked out from the Tsa attack. So--"

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She touched his lips. "You must be starving-*weak*." He felt her moving. "If you help a little, I can walk. Let's get up to the galley, and I'll feed us something."

Quite suddenly, he *was* hungry. "Sure. Let's go."

Between his support and her guidance, they got upship fast. At the galley level she tried to turn, but Ivan said, "First you should check Control out, tell me what I missed." So they went up.

He had to give her some of the computer codes; her work hadn't included them. When the answers came, they fit his own guesses of speed and distance a lot closer than luck would allow.

"Ivan? We're a long way from Shaarbant."

"I know. And staying below redline, a long *time*, too." He paused. "Is it just my imagination, or is the *Deux* shaking a lot?"

"It's shaking, all right. Do you know why?"

Headshake. "Not sure. We plowed air at top max accel, though-'way past redline. I hope I didn't bust something."

Her brief laugh sounded nervous. "Me too. But-shouldn't we cut the Hoyfarul Drive, slow down? Get ready to turn back?"

He tried to think. "Maybe. Tregare said-I don't know." Of a sudden, again his hunger came real to him. "Before we change anything, I need full readings, all the instruments. Let's eat first."

They went to the galley; if Dacia hadn't been with him, he could have found it by the faint odors. He sat, and soon she fed him-literally, cutting the food and bringing bites to his mouth. After a little experimenting, he could handle the coffee by himself. *Thank peace for small favors.*

"Ivan?" Her tone implied a slight, puzzled scowl.

"Yeah? Hey-good meal, Dacia. Thanks."

"And welcome. But, Ivan, we have to talk. Your eyes-you don't see anything at all?" He shook his head. "Then why is it that you keep them closed so tightly?"

He hadn't noticed, but she was right; his eyelids were clamped shut so hard they hurt. He tried to relax and open them; pain stabbed sharper and the lids squeezed shut again. He grimaced, and Dacia asked what was happening. "I'm not sure; it hurts to open them, is all. Hold on a minute, while I try something." Deliberately he forced his lids open; the pain made him close them. Again, and the same result. On the third try he endured the hurt, and gradually it left him. "I don't see a thing, Dacia. But are they open now?"

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"Yes." Her voice was near; his face felt her breath. "Ivan- whatever happened, there is no visible damage to your eyes."

"Visible" nearly threw him into laughter he couldn't have stopped. He took a deep breath. "Well, that's something. But, now what?"

She paused. "Keep them open-that's right. And now move them, up and down, and side to side." He pretended to look in those directions, and thought he felt movement. Dacia said, "Yes. Those muscles work, all right."

Those muscles tired quickly, too. Ivan let himself "look" straight ahead, but forced his eyes open after each involuntary blink; the pain, now, was minor and lessening. "Just a moment," Dacia said; he heard her get up, move away, come back and sit again. Her breath moved air against his face. "Ivan, I want to try something. Just keep your eyes open." His cheeks and forehead felt warmth.

"What's that all about? What did you do?" In his ears, his pulse beat fast; his breathing came rapid and shallow.

Sure, he trusted Dacia-but he couldn't *see*.

Until she spoke he didn't know he'd said it out loud. "Ivan-I'm sorry. I should have told you." The sound she made, then, didn't quite qualify as a laugh. "Testing the pupillary reflex. Shine a light, see if the pupils contract. Yours do, Ivan."

He couldn't understand. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her hand clasped his shoulder, then moved up to cup his cheek. "Whatever it



was the Tsa did to you, your eyes themselves still work."

"Then why the hell can't I see?" He knew he'd snarled it-but her hand on his face told him he needn't apologize.

"I don't know. Their clawing, in our minds-it blocked synapses, so we couldn't act. Froze us, like a muscle cramp. So perhaps-"

Wrist to elbow, he stroked her forearm. "A cramp in my optic nerves, somehow? Or even the visual center itself? What do you think?"

She had no idea. "Too sketchy, what I remember about the pupillary reflex arc. But it still operates, so whatever they did to you has to be farther back, past the arc's extent."

Slowly, he considered what she said. "And will I-what are the chances that I'll ever see again?"

With a rush, she came and held him. Her tears wet his face. "All I can do-the same as you, Ivan-is *hope* you will!"

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They went back up to Control. There, sitting in the watch officer's position, Ivan felt more like a ship's commander than like a helpless cripple. He tapped fingers on the panel's edge, and said, "It's time we woke more people. Not too many. Who?"

The first answers were easy. Jeremy Crowfoot. Anders Kobolak, because the *Deux* needed a ranking officer who could see, and Haskell Ornoway for backup. Alina Rostadt because Anders would want his wife with him. The two top engineers and a couple of good drive techs. Who else, though?

Ivan snapped his fingers. "Ellalee. If she gets training, how to fly the ship, and shooting, her ability to resist the Tsa could make a difference." Dacia agreed; in turn she suggested Arlen Limmer, both for training and as a general handyman, and after a moment's pause, Ivan nodded.

Downship they went, to start the resuscitations. Ivan wasn't sure why he went along, when he couldn't even see what was happening, let alone help. By the time they got there, he decided it was because he'd rather be with Dacia than alone.

When she began opening the cocoons, though, he felt he was in the way, and found his own dark passage to the galley. The big pot still had coffee in it; after he spilled one cup ail over himself, he was more careful how he drank it. The stuff was getting stale, but what else was there to do?

After a time he heard people coming upship, talking. He couldn't get the words, and as they came up onto the galley level, everybody shut up. He heard them walk in, and said, "Everybody okay?"

"Yes." "Sure." "Just fine." "Hungry, though."

He could sort out some of the voices, but not all. "Do we have all ten, Dacia, that we agreed on?"

"Yes, Ivan."

"And no others?"

"That's right."

"Then while everyone gets fed, we should decide who else we need to wake up. If anyone."

He waited, and Anders Kobolak said, "First thing, we ought to get the ship squared away. The way it's shimmying, it needs some work."

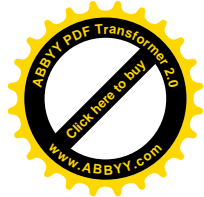
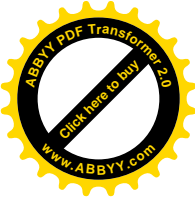
"I'm not hungry." Rancee Peleter, First Engineer under Hagen Trent, spoke softly. "I'll go down to Drive and have a look." The man's walk, when he left, was as quiet as his voice.

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Someone's fingers drammed the table. Ivan's bet was Anders Kobolak, and when he spoke the man's name, the sound stopped. Ivan said, "We have to change some procedures, I guess Dacia's told you."

Kobolak cleared his throat. "Yes, I was waiting for someone to mention the obvious. You're right; Dacia told us you're blind. So what you mean, I guess, is that you want me to take command."

Ivan bit back his first angry response, and took a breath. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind." He needed Kobolak's eyes, sure-but Ivan intended to keep making the decisions. Now, though, he paused. Maybe Anders was right. Ivan cleared his throat. "I want to be fair. Given your full cooperation-all of you-I think I'm fit to command this bucket. But if a majority thinks otherwise-" He shook his hand. "Vote by show of hands. Dacia, tell me just the numbers, no names. Question, yes or no-do I



keep command? All in favor." Pause. "Opposed?" Again he waited. "Results, Dacia?"

"Nine yes, two no. Ivan, you retain command."

A hand grasped his. "I voted no, of course," said Anders Kobolak. "I still don't think a blind man should try to run a ship. But my word on it-I'll do my best to prove myself wrong."

"Thanks." Ivan's voice was less steady than he wanted it, but he went ahead, anyway. "As I started to say, before, the command function has to change a little, now. What I keep is control *of policy*. Operationally, Anders, you're in charge of how that policy gets carried out. Clear?"

There was more talk, spelling things out. At the end, Ivan was as satisfied as he could expect to be-the way things were.

With the *Deux* still outrunning light, watch officers had little to do. So Ivan scheduled all Control people to train on Crowfoot's computer simulations. Three watch teams-Anders and Alina, Ornoway and Crowfoot, and Arlen Limmer with Ellalee. He'd switch the learnings around later, he said, to give everyone a shot at working with everyone else. And because young Limmer was the weakest instructor-but that part, he didn't say.

Dacia stood no watches; he needed her with him. That wasn't how he put it, but he didn't figure he was fooling anyone.

At evening, by ship's time, he and Dacia went to captain's quarters. Ivan was nervous; when it came bedtime, he stalled. Finally she asked what was wrong, and he had to tell her.

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Sitting, his blind stare aimed where he'd last heard her, he explained.

What if the impotence of blindness reflected in other ways? "When I came out of Welfare, remember, not even Erika's psych-techs could fix it so I was any good. And now-"

Dacia came to sit on the arm of his chair, and held him. "Ivan. It'll be all right. Come-you'll see." She gave an embarrassed giggle. "Well, that too, I bet, sometime. But tonight-"

In the bed with her, at first he thought his fear was rightly based, or that the fear itself would prevent him. But she told him, while she did warm, gentle things, "We're not in a hurry; just wait."

And finally, when he relaxed and simply enjoyed what was happening, the rest of it happened, too.

Except for Hagen Trent, Ivan hadn't known the Drive people too well. Talking with Raneé Peleter, next day, he remembered him as a short, cheerful black man who did his job with a minimum of fuss.

Now, across the galley table, the soft voice didn't sound cheerful. "I've never seen a drive act this way, skipper. I mean, the continual shaking. Under overload, sure." Remembering Peleter more clearly now, Ivan visualized a quiet shrug. "I don't have Trent's theoretical background, of course, or his FTL experience. But-"

"But we have to go with what you do know. So, would you suggest we cut the Hoyfarul Drive now?" He sipped a beer Dacia had brought him.

"Cut it dead? Anything sudden-hard to tell what might happen." Judging by his voice, Peleter had leaned forward. "I've tinkered, refining the balance; it helped. To a pretty minor extent, though, worse luck. I'd say, cut FTL drive back a notch at a time, with me down there rebalancing after each change." Ivan heard him sigh. "I'm sorry-I know that's not much to offer. But it's my best guess."

Ivan nodded. "So well go with it." He checked the time with Dacia, and said, "At ten hundred hours; nearly half an hour. Right?"

"Sure, skipper. I'll be ready." Ivan heard feet scuff, then only the first few steps as the man walked away.

Ivan turned to Dacia. "Anders has the duty. Let's go up."

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In Control the Second Hat greeted them; Dacia steered Ivan to the seat beside him, and Ivan told him what was planned.

"Sounds reasonable," said Anders, and reported the ship's speed and position. "We won't get back soon, you know."

"I know." Kobolak's tone was factual, not complaining; so was Ivan's. "We



haven't wasted time. Peleter needed leeway to check the drive. Now we're ready to make changes."

"Sure." Now Kobolak gave data from the gravitic detectors; space ahead was clear. Then they sat quietly until Anders said, "Ten hundred coming up." The intercom switch clicked. "Ready to cut, Peleter. Twelve seconds." And he counted down.

"Go!" Still shaking, the ship bucked hard. The vibration eased, grew again, and finally settled to a steady pitch.

"It's worse, isn't it," said Ivan, "than before the cut?"

The intercom must have been live; Peleter's voice answered. "Instability, a few percent increment I can't balance out. If it's a resonant point we should be able to get past it. Ready if you are."

Again the *Deux* shuddered, and again the residual vibration was worse. Ivan waited, but no one said anything. Well, somebody had to decide, and he'd asked for the job. "Give the count, Anders, and hit it another one!"

Four notches later-two short of FTL cutoff, if Ivan hadn't lost track-the *Deux's* lurch flung him so hard against his safety harness that he nearly blacked out. Getting his breath and rubbing bruised ribs, he said, "Anders-Dacia-you all right?" They gave him brief assurances. "Peleter! What's happening down there?"

The answering voice wasn't Peleter's. "Sir-Mr. Peleter, he's knocked out. Not strapped in good enough. Scraped up a little, but breathing okay. I don't-" The voice stopped; the *Deux's* shuddering came in great waves; nausea rose in Ivan's throat.

Now he knew what was happening, and waited for it to end. But it seemed *long*, until the sub-light detectors bleeped, and told him that the *Deux* was safely below *C*. Anders gasped. "We're down, Marchant. Under light-speed, I mean."

"I know. Like our very first test run, way back when, with old Hoyfarul himself. The drive blew." Ivan raised his voice. "Drive room! Anybody there know how to reset the circuit breakers, in the right order, so we can start putting on some decel?"

The intercom distorted the sound of someone clearing his

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throat. "I know how. But sir-we blew a hell of a lot more than breakers."

Ivan fumed, an hour later, with a coffee cup in one hand and the other held by Dacia. If he could *see* what was going on...

"Any more news yet?"

"No. Peleter said he'd come up and report, as soon as he could."

But it was nearly another hour before the man came to the galley. He had a small bandage on his head, Dacia whispered to Ivan, but seemed to be all right. And all he could say, basically, was that the Hoyfarul Drive was down, with a number of components burned out, "-and *maybe* enough spares to fix it. The lock circuits-they didn't cause the trouble but they took the backsurge. I don't know-"

"What's being done?" Ivan frowned. The only way to fight the discouragement in Peleter's voice was to focus on what *could* be accomplished. "What orders did you leave?"

"Well-without the lock circuits we can still build an acoherent field, a standard sub-light drive, and get decel for turnaround. Nowhere near as quickly, of course. And keep working on the Hoyfarul units-they'll be out of circuit, dead, and safe to tinker with-and hope to restore a coherent FTL field later."

Ivan nodded. "Makes sense. Keep your people on it. Don't short anybody on rest, though; it's not that urgent. And-good work."

"Thanks, skipper. I guess I'll get back to it now."

And not much later, Ornoway on watch announced deceleration coming up. "Point-eight of max." Redline-max, he meant, not full-out. On the count, it came, and held steady. Peleter, Ivan decided, must be a good man. But was he good enough for this situation?

XIII Lisele

Things at the crash site didn't happen very fast, the next few days. Trent had more trouble, building Tregare's antenna, than he seemed to expect. Metal in stock was too long or too short; he had to cut and splice a lot. But the framework, leaning up against the scout, did grow.



Rissa's sightings on the white moon-it was the synchronous one, all right-gave the party's comparative longitude. Tregare shook his head. "Well over a radian, we are, from Sassden and the *Deux*-maybe one-and-a-half, at worst. I'm not sure, exactly; didn't record the angle, as seen from there."

"How far in kilos?" Lisele asked.

Tregare's mouth turned down at the corners. "One hell of a lot."

As long as Jenise stayed still, she could make do without pain shots. But the cast wasn't right; any attempt at using the hand jarred the crushed wrist, and she went pale. And the end of the middle finger was the only part she could wiggle at all.

Tregare, though, improved fast. Rissa said he was trying to overdo, but usually he didn't fail too badly. The day he insisted on going outside, with a heavy plastic wrap around his cast, Lisele watched. And sure enough, two steps from the airlock, his crutch slipped and he went flat! When he rolled over and sat up, he was streaming mud. Laughing, though, when his face stopped showing pain.

Her father, Lisele decided, was a stubborn man. He worked a long time trying to get the mud out of his hair before he let Rissa shear it away. Seeing his bare head, Lisele gasped-*the scars!* Rissa touched one. "This is from Stronghold, when Korbeith's UET diehards ambushed you."

"Trying to break max-secure detention, no less." Looking

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toward Trent and Rorvik, he nodded. "Next day I cut their throats."

Lisele's eyes widened. "Their *throats?*' Her own father...?"

Rissa spoke. "Not for the attack on Tregare. He executed those men for killing innocent hostages, out of spite and terrorism."

"And to show Butcher Korbeith's gang," said Tregare, "that I meant business." Lisele nodded. Dealing with UET, she supposed, people had had to do a lot of things they'd rather not.

Rissa's fingers spanned other scars. "These, I do not know-"

Looking up, Tregare grinned. "Me either. Well, the jagged one I got at Escape, when we first took my old *Inconnu*. The rest-mostly from the Slaughterhouse, I expect. Easy to get marked up, there."

"Yes. A bad place, that must have been." Rissa smiled then. "Bran, you misled us. Your skull is nowhere near as lumpy as you gave us to believe. Hardly at all, in fact."

Later that day, Lisele got a new job. If it happened, Jenise said, that they had to leave the scout, they'd need to live off the country. "To some extent, anyway. So we'd better know what's safe to eat. Why don't you bring me some samples of local vegetation, and I'll try to check it out."

So with several plastic bags looped under her belt, Lisele set out looking. She didn't remember much about the native foods they'd eaten at Shtegel, and supposed they'd look different cooked, anyway. So she had to start from scratch.

She hadn't much noticed what grew in the swamp; now she did. On the hummocks were bushes with pale green berries; she took a handful. A water plant's leaves looked like something she could have seen in a salad on Earth; all right, she gathered some. And the same plant had a fat root; broken open, it smelled like raw potato. That went into a bag, too.

She ran out of land-clumps; near the edge of deeper water, where the great beast had jumped at them, she turned back. She still had empty bags so she went on past the scout, saying hello to Hagen Trent who was cussing a piece of metal that kept slipping as he tried to clamp it, and continued to the path behind the vessel.

Approaching a thick stand of tall trees, she found that it sat on a real rise of solid ground. The middle was at least two meters above water level and the surface, was dry. How big was

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it? She looked and made a guess. Thirty meters wide, maybe, and nearly a hundred long-though dense growth hid the far end from her.

Here the underbrush grew thick, and the ground cover included plants she hadn't seen in the swamp. She took samples until she ran out of empty bags, and left specimens of what she'd taken, laid out in a row beside a tree, so that next time she wouldn't duplicate anything. Then she went back to the scout.

One thing, she was bursting to tell somebody: if half the stuff on that island was



safe to eat, rescue wasn't urgent. Not that she didn't want to get back to *Inconnu Deux*-but if they had to, they could all *live* here.

"Yes." Listening to Lisele's story, Rissa nodded. Jenise was busy looking through the samples Lisele had harvested. Rissa said, "This scout is stocked to feed six people for as many months, Earth reckoning." She looked away; Lisele knew she was figuring. "Or-assuming, Lisele, that you eat at adult capacity, which I doubt-we have food for perhaps one hundred ninety of this world's shorter days." She shrugged. "Make it two hundred."

Lisele scowled. "But if we can eat what grows *here*, too?" "Only up to a point," said Jenise. She used her cast to hold a bag stationary; with her other hand she picked out shreds of vegetation. She smelled them, looked through a magnifying glass, then either bit off a tiny piece to chew and taste or else set the item aside. Now she chewed one, and nodded. "Good, that." She laid the bag over with others she'd approved, wrote a line on her notepad, and reached for the next sample. Lisele noticed that up to now, the approved and rejected piles were running about even. "But the problem is," Jenise said, "we can't take all our diet locally, no matter how much we find good. Trace elements, specific amino acids, all that-we'd be risking deficiencies. Plus, total vegetarianism, without expert guidance, carries its own risks."

Maybe. Lisele said, "What if we find meat, too?" Rissa made a snort, and Lisele saw her mother hiding a smile. "Your pardon, Liesel Selene-but *what* meat? The water beast that leaped at us, or the small scuttling things we hear but never see?"

Jenise shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Even if we caught something, meat's trickier to judge, for safety. We don't have lab facilities and I wouldn't know how to use them,

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anyway. So somebody would have to eat the stuff and see what happened. Too risky."

"True," said Rissa, "unless the alternative is to starve." She reached to touch Lisele's cheek. "Even so, my daughter, you may be doubling our effective food supply, and that is no mean feat. Now-I believe you said you have brought only a fraction of the types of plants available on your island?" And Rissa winked.

"Oh, yes; sure. I can find more." She found extra bags, rigged them at her belt, and headed back to the island. Once there, again she took care to lay a specimen of every new sample with her treeside museum. The first lot was quite a help to her, so she wouldn't bag a sample she'd already taken in. Well, a couple of times she did that, but then checked against her display and threw the extras out.

When she had no bag left empty, she decided to walk all the way around the island. She couldn't always follow the waterline, because some places the brush was too thick to plow through. So she detoured, but kept as near the water as she could.

And coming around a large, dense thicket, back toward the shoreline, across a clearing she saw the animal.

It was big, was her first thought-like a very large dog, but built high and narrow. Pink, mostly, but splotched with black and white spots, and patches of pale bristles. It looked to be leaning over something it had mostly swallowed, all but the legs that stuck out of the gaping mouth and reached to the ground. The thing's own legs curved back from where its body split to form them; they were board-thin sidewise and board-wide the other way, ending in heavy-clawed toes. Then it reared up on those legs, and the two things in its mouth reached out and wiggled, and it came at her.

And she simply stood there, and watched it come.

Time slowed and nearly stopped. Lisele found part of her mind watching the rest of it decide whether to be scared, and what to do about it. The creature's eyes sat wide on the sides of its head; she couldn't see both the tiny reddish organs at once; the head swung back and forth, showing her first one eye and then the other. She could see all the teeth, though-a lot of them. Big ones. They could take her arm off and hardly notice. But if they did, they'd bite off the thing's own tentacles, or front legs, or whatever they were. Tongues, maybe?

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Until her foot caught on something behind her, she hadn't noticed she was dancing backward, staying ahead of the beast. Catching balance, she glanced down to see what she'd stumbled against. A stick, a good thick one, and long as her arm.



Behind, now, was heavy brush-hardly any room to move back. She picked up the stick; it was heavier than it looked, and she had no idea what she was going to do with it.

Why wasn't she afraid? Lisele shook her head; without thought she aimed the heavy stick at the creature's mouth, and held it steady. The animal still came directly at her; its mouth opened to take the piece of wood, and the tentacles grasped it. The tip of one of them touched her hand; *it burned!* Gasping, she stepped back and to the side; the beast stopped, and reared up. The clutching tentacles retracted; she could hear the teeth grinding at the wood. Still the head moved, peering at her first with one eye and then the other. And now again, with half the stick's length taken into its mouth, and tentacles reaching, the thing bent forward and came toward her.

Straight at the end of the stick, she kicked her hardest. Suddenly it was nearly all the way inside the mouth, and around it a blue-brown fluid gushed out. Lisele stepped farther aside; the creature shuddered, and made noises like something coughing itself to death. Once more the tentacles retracted; then the beast fell forward, and they came out again and pushed it up, body almost level. It turned to face her; she began to circle it. Trying to follow, its tongue-legs stumbled and it fell over.

For a long time she stood, her own legs shaking, until it no longer breathed. By then, she was too tired to bother with crying-and what was the point?

Tregare, on the scout, wanted to go view the beast, but Rissa insisted he couldn't. When Lisele said that probably nobody could carry it all the way along the slippery path, he settled for Rissa's taking a holocamera. "Shoot from every angle," he said. Rissa agreed to do so, and to bring samples of flesh, stomach contents and the tip of a tentacle, so Jenise could try to analyze them.

First, though, she washed Lisele's sore hand, and applied salve and a light bandage. Then she and Lisele and Hagen Trent went to the island. At least the creature hadn't gone anywhere.

Seeing it lying flat on one side, Trent gave a low whistle. "Such a thing-in my craziest nightmares, I couldn't have dreamed it. But if Lisele could kill it, it can't be too dangerous."

Rissa turned on him-and if a tone of voice could bite,

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Lisele thought, the man's ears would be hurting. "We do not know yet, exactly *how* she did it. Now, I would ask." She did, and when Lisele told how time slowed and she *watched* herself do things, Rissa nodded. "I thought as much. The ability is not rare, but hardly common, either. The suspension of time is subjective, largely; while adrenaline does speed the reflexes somewhat, it is the subjective time for *deciding* that makes the real difference." She coughed slightly, then cleared her throat. "I have had the reaction many times; to a lesser extent, Tregare has the trait also. I had wondered whether Lisele would inherit it; apparently, to her benefit, she has done so."

Lisele shook her head. "It's so *strange*. I'd never-" She didn't know what to say next, so she stopped.

Trent said, "Then the beast is more dangerous than I thought?"

Rissa shrugged. "If there are more, I suppose we shall find out." Then she used the holocamera. Trent helped her turn the animal this way and that, to give the different views Tregare wanted. She cut meat from the flank, and opened the abdomen. Half-digested material went into one of Lisele's bags.

Rissa turned away to leave. Lisele said, "Jenise wanted some of the leg, or tongue, whatever it is, too." She took out her pruning knife and knelt beside the dead thing. Then she paused; she couldn't touch the part she needed, without burning herself some more. All right; she had one sample bag left. Sliced down the middle, it made a pair of protective mitts. In a few moments she had her sample, and wrapped it. Then she stood. "Let's go."

Back in the scout, Tregare exclaimed over the holo-pics and Jenise analyzed Lisele's specimen. Finally she said, "I'm not sure of all of it, but a main component is formic acid."

After a moment, Lisele nodded. "Oh, sure. Ant bites."

Next, Jenise opened the bag of stomach contents. Using tongs, she sorted the material into little piles, leaving several disgusting-looking lumps to one side. After a while she looked up. "Most of the vegetation is things I've already cleared as edible. More important, there's nothing here that I've figured to be unsafe for us. Some are new to me; maybe Lisele will find samples of them tomorrow. But for now-"



Lisele said, "You think we can eat meat from this animal?"

Jenise shrugged. "I don't know yet. We don't have the equipment for all the tests I'd like to check the aminos, say. I

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can test for metallic poisons, that sort of thing. But first, will someone put a small piece to boil, with a Sid over it?"

Rissa's eyes narrowed. "Of course. As the volatile components boil out, the odors will give us clues." Soon she had the setup heating.

"If it smells all right," said Jenise, "I'll sample the broth."

Rorvik's limited chemistry and the "sniff test" gave the meat, tentatively, a clean bill of health. But the spoonful of broth she sampled stayed down only about fifteen minutes. Pale-faced, Jenise insisted on trying a bit of meat, anyway, and an hour later her digestive system hadn't made any protest.

"Whatever's toxic, then, boils out," said Tregare. "Which means we don't ever roast or broil or fry the stuff." Rissa suggested boiling the meat in several successive waters, to get rid of as much poison as possible. After a second boiling, Tregare insisted on trying a sample, and it gave him no trouble.

"Where'd you get that idea?" he asked Rissa.

She paused, brow wrinkled; then she nodded. "Browsing in an old book, at Hulzein Lodge on Number One. The method was applied to kidneys, which otherwise have a rather ammoniac smell."

"Sure." Tregare smiled. "I used to hate the things, until you served up bushstomper kidney at the cabin there, across the Big Hills from the Lodge. That's how you did it, huh?"

"That is how, yes." Rissa stood. "Now, should we go and harvest more bounty from Lisele's kill? Hagen?" The engineer got up, too. Rissa hadn't said that Lisele couldn't come along, so Lisele did-and helped cut meat from the back and sides, then carried her share into the scout, where much of it was wrapped and frozen.

At dinner, Stonzai and Sevshen tried portions of the new stuff-vegetables and meat, both-and showed no ill effects.

Next, with help from Rissa and the two Shrakken, Trent got his new antenna system up among the trees, oriented, and connected to the scout. Inside, Tregare had to admit there was no way he could perch to operate the up-ended comm panel. So Rissa took over.

"Try the *Deux* first," he said, settling into one of the relocated seats. "With the mountains in between, the odds aren't good-even if the ship's still on Shaarbant. But worth a try."

The *Deux* didn't answer. Nor, when Stonzai spoke, did the

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Shrakken bases at Sassden or Shtegel. Nearly an hour, they kept trying. Finally, crouched over the panel, Rissa turned and said, "I find no coherent signals whatsoever. But this does *not* prove that the Tsa have wiped those bases out."

Tregare nodded. "Curvature of the planet, yeah. Ground-to-ground equipment, we don't have. The Shrakken have relay satellites that accept our frequencies, but damned if I know how we'd spot one, from here." He rubbed his chin. "I was hoping this place had enough ionosphere to give us the chance of a freak skip condition." Now he grinned. "Maybe somebody *did* hear us, but the skip just isn't working in both directions. Well, short of that-since we can't get upstairs ourselves, our best shot is if somebody flies over. You want to make a loop-tape, Rissa, and leave it transmitting? And Stonzai-will you make one, too, for raising *your* people, just in case? We can set the receivers to give audible alarm, and to record, if anyone does call back."

"As you say, I do." And not long after, she and Rissa finished their jobs and climbed down. Rissa stretched and grimaced, but the Shrakken showed no sign of being uncomfortable.

"And what, Bran, do we do now?"

"Wait. Well, go ahead with the food-gathering project, and all-except that from now on, that's a job for two, and with guns. But mostly, just wait."

It was another week before Tregare, after dinner, said, "We're not going to get any answer. Folks, it's time we figured out our next move."



XIV IVAN

Inconnu Deux slowed, and "stopped," and headed back toward Shaarbant. Over a drink in captain's quarters, Anders and Alina visiting Ivan and Dacia, Anders Kobolak asked, "Did everybody get the word, how many light-years we are, out from Shaarbant?"

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Ivan had guessed, but at the figure Anders gave, he whistled. Translating distance into travel time, he whistled again. "Something more?" Dacia asked; he shook his head. But- without the Hoyfarul Drive, the *Deux* had real trouble. Its food supply was based on FTL travel times. Some folks might have to go back into freeze....

Without stirring up alarm, Ivan checked on the matter. After all, if the captain wanted an inventory, he got one. He was relieved to find that things weren't urgent yet-but he made a point of getting Peleter's reports as soon as possible. If he had to hand his people a bombshell, he wanted to pick his own time for it.

Crowfoot knew Hoyfarul's theories, the math part, and Peleter knew the hardware. Their expertise didn't quite meet, let alone overlap. But working together, as the *Deux* built speed toward C, they began to understand each other better. Sitting in as they talked, lounging in captain's quarters, Ivan could tell that they were nearing a conclusion. He thought he knew what it would be; he hoped he was wrong.

But nothing stinks as bad as dead hopes. Tregare had said that once, and now Ivan knew how right his brother-in-law had been. "Our parabolic, acoherent drive field," said Crowfoot, "is solid as a rock, for sub-light speeds. But locking it into coherence, closing the field into ellipsoidal form for FTL-" He clicked his tongue. "The thing's not stable enough. And given what we have aboard to work with, I don't think it's going to be."

Accepting, Ivan nodded. "You'll both keep trying, of course?"

"Sure," said Peleter. "But, skipper-don't expect too much."

Ivan's sigh came from tension, not relief; he hoped he kept it quiet. Turning to Dacia beside him, he said, "We need a meeting. Everybody. Drive and Control can attend over the intercom."

She asked no questions; she called and set things up, putting Ellalee on the comm and Peleter on driverroom duty. After he heard several people come in, Ivan said, "Is everyone here, that should be?"

"Just a minute." Then, "Yes, Ivan."

"All right." He ranged his stare, that meant nothing now, around the room. One thing he'd learned-even though he

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couldn't see, pointing his eyes at people had an effect on them. *So use it.*

No one spoke. Ivan cleared his throat. "I'll make this quick. What we have is slower-than-light drive and faster-than-light food supplies. That means, some have to go back into freeze and sleep their way to Shaarbant." He paused. "Comments?"

"I have some." An unfamiliar voice. "Why did we have to wait until now, to hear this?" A woman, and an angry one.

"Because until now I didn't know for sure. Who are you?"

"Melaine Holmbach, Drive-tech First. Nobody asked me to get frozen, or thawed out later, and now you don't ask, either. You just *tell* us. Don't I have *anything* to say about it?"

First she angered him; then he felt pity; finally, only command was left to him. He unclenched the fist he'd nearly slammed on the table, and said, "Yes, of course; everybody gets to speak their piece. But you have to know the ground rules-Melaine, is it? We have twelve of us up, awake and eating and breathing. The way things are in your Drive room, we don't have food enough to keep that many alive, all the way to Shaarbant. And I'm speaking of short rations." He blinked, ignoring the pain that had become trivial, and tried to scowl in Holmbach's direction. "Can you understand that much?"

A hand touched his own; close to his ear, the woman's voice came then. "You mean it, don't you?" Ivan nodded. "I thought it was a scash-but it isn't?" He shook his head. On his hand, hers squeezed hard. "Then say what you need, Captain."



He found the numbers hard to say. "Four back to freeze, at least; more later, maybe. Without the Hoyfarul Drive, eight is the outside that our stores can support. And I'm not certain of that many-but that's how we'll start."

The yelling, then, didn't surprise him. Ivan stayed shut up; let them get it off their chests, and then maybe they might start making sense. A man-*who?*-shouted, "Just for a start, blind man, who the hell needs *youT*!"

Ivan's voice caught in his throat; he couldn't answer. Then he heard Anders Kopolak say, "I do."

To know what happened then, Ivan didn't need vision. Someone was scuffling; then Haskell Ornoway said, "What we're all going to do now is sit down, while Captain Marchant tells us the rest of it."

Ivan wished it could be that simple. Quickly he assessed what he knew of those present. Then he made up his mind, and

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spoke. "First off, dump the idea that freeze is second-class treatment. I once paid through the nose to ride that way, Earth to Terranova and then to Number One. Fourteen ship's months, which came to something like twenty-six years, objective time."

He listened; no one's breathing sounded like getting ready to interrupt, so he didn't hurry. "Freeze spares you a lot of boring routine-and *you don't age*, not enough to notice. Think about it."

He looked to where he remembered Dacia being, and she said, "You're making your point, Ivan. Go ahead."

His held breath came out faster than he liked. He said, "All right; priorities, now. I'm staying up, myself, because Bran Tregare gave me responsibility for this ship-to keep it safe for him. And I *owe* that man." He blinked; the pain tweaked at him. *And now who?*

He had to do it fast. "Those I'm keeping up with me, you'll be the ones I need most." He didn't want to laugh, then, but couldn't repress a snort. "The hell of it is, any choice I make is going to have holes in it." They were holding better than he'd expected; no one spoke. *Damn it!*-he couldn't list the ones for freeze; he didn't know all the names. He'd have to do it the other way.

All right. "For starters-" Peleter for Drive, and Crowfoot for there and Control both. For reasons he didn't give, both the Kopolaks-and Alina. "Ellalee Ganelong resisted the Tsa attack better than any of us; that ability might be the most useful of *all*" *And...?*

Ornoway and young Limmer broke the silence, each giving reasons to claim the eighth spot. Pointing his blind stare at each voice in turn, Ivan waved a hand. "No. Your thinking's valid, and given any leeway I'd go along with you. But I don't have that leeway. So-"

Who? "One more for Drive." And what was the woman's name? Oh, yes. "Melaine Holmbach."

Her voice came hoarse. "Me? Why, captain?"

"You don't want the assignment?"

"Sure I do. But *why?*"

Because you know how to change your mind; I heard you do it.

But he couldn't say that. "Luck of the draw. Somebody has to take the hard jobs."

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Embarrassing, Ivan found it, to shake hands and send people off to freeze, where Dacia and Alina would do the final trundling. The ones he hardly knew didn't bother him, but Mask and Arlen-he felt he should say something and didn't know what. Finally he did find words. "You'll be up and doing when we come to Shaarbant. It's only the dead time, you're missing."

They left, and so did others-until, if Ivan had heard and counted correctly, only Anders Kopolak sat with him. He cleared his throat, and knew it was only a nervous reflex. "Anders. I'd like to thank you for backing me, when the man called me useless." He found he was straining to *see*, and made himself relax. "I don't mean to push anything, you understand-but why?"

Ivan heard knuckles cracking, and guessed the Second Hat was frowning, also, before he said, "I spoke the truth, was all. As soon as that idiot insulted you, I had this picture-of me with the *Deux* to keep safe, and you not there to turn to." He made a small cough. "I'm not much for false modesty, and in most circumstances I



believe I'm capable of running this ship. Or any other."

"Yes." Ivan nodded. "I'd agree with that."

"But now-going back to face the Tsa again, with the Hoyfarul Drive out-I need that brain of yours. You make good decisions; you have the combat-type mind, like Rissa's, and Tregare's." Very briefly, Anders laughed. "I'm working on it. But I don't think I'm quite there, yet."

Ivan had to smile. "We deserve a drink. Want to pour?" He waved toward the corner where the little bar-console sat. "Bourbon on ice, for me."

Slowly, compared to what a coherent drive field could have done, the *Deux's* speed built. Peleter and Crowfoot, with Melaine Holmbach working extra hours as "gopher" for them, spent long days working over the Hoyfarul apparatus. But despite improvisations that sounded ingenious to Ivan, the FTL drive stayed dead.

Ivan's original job on the *Deux* had been Gunnery Officer, but Dacia was the ship's best remaining gunner; he set her to instructing Ellalee and Alina. He didn't have enough people for separate operation of each turret, so he had Crowfoot rearrange the controls-the pilot handled the central turret and two "side gunners" each had charge of three-turret groups, set to traverse together. Heterodyne and convergence couldn't be synchronized

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perfectly, but after a little practice Dacia said the system seemed to work pretty well.

Ivan wasn't satisfied, though; he wanted to be able to *do* more. It should be possible, he thought, for a gunner to work from auditory signals. So, in one side-position, Crowfoot rigged the circuitry to feed a set of headphones.

The trouble was that even with different signal patterns, Ivan couldn't sort out the heterodyne indications at his right ear from the range checks at his left. Finally, swearing, he found the "Stop" switch and got up. "Come on, Jere. Maybe coffee will liven up my thinking." In the galley Ivan talked of other matters, not consciously considering the gunnery problem. He knew how his mind could work, sometimes, and finally-

"Got it!" He snapped his fingers. His mistake, he decided- but didn't say so-was going with Crowfoot's lead, when Crowfoot himself had never been able to work a turret. How to put it? "I think we went wrong, Jere, working one function into each ear."

Crowfoot's tone was mild. "How else would you suggest we do it?"

Quickly, gulping his coffee, Ivan told his idea. Then they went upship and Crowfoot made some changes. When he was ready, Ivan-hands on his control levers-said, "Feed me heterodyne," and for a few minutes he worked with it. A steady tone now, fed to both ears equally; when it rose in pitch, it meant the circle on the screen was tilting to the right; and vice-versa when the pitch lowered. When it was exactly "on," the tone was pure; any deviation distorted the waveform and threw in extra harmonics. "Well, *that* part works."

The range indicator was different. When either range light came on, a different, higher tone beeped into the corresponding ear. The farther off correct range, the faster the beeping.

Very quickly, Ivan got the hang of it. "Now for all the marbles. Both signals at once." The sounds came, and for a few moments he couldn't sort them out. And then he could. When the simulation run ended, Crowfoot patted Ivan's shoulder.

"I think "you have it whipped. Your score's not outstanding, but after all, it was your first run using this method."

An hour later, Ivan's performance was within a few points of what he'd done when his eyes worked. Tired, he stretched and stood. "I'll need more practice, but it does work. Thanks, Jere."

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When he told Dacia the results, over dinner, he tried to keep his voice casual. But of course he couldn't.

In gunnery and pilot training, people began to level off at their own natural grades of skill-for the most part, the results pleased Ivan. His own shooting, he realized, was more useful to his ego than to the ship's safety. Nearly everybody else could do much the same as he could, in that line-and see what they were doing, as well. And most could do something he couldn't at all-operate the ship itself, guide it. He considered adding audible indicators to more of the ship's instruments, then realized the sheer number of signals he'd need, and growled to Dacia, "It'd sound



like fifty cats fighting. Nobody could sort heads or tails out of it." And meanwhile the *Deux* built speed to as near light as fuel economy allowed, and pushed ahead, chewing time.

XV. Tregare

Tregare waited until evening to call council. Things were a mess, he knew, but he still felt good. For dinner he'd tried a really good-sized slab of tonguewalker haunch; he was coming to like the stuff, and so was his digestion. Now he sat back with a glass of brandy and waited for people to be ready to talk, and to listen.

His leg, in the cast, itched where he couldn't scratch-but except for twinges, the ache was gone. He wished Jenise was doing as well; she still took pills, and couldn't wiggle her fingers much.

She looked pretty good, though, except that Tregare wasn't used to everybody's bare scalps showing through short stubble. Of course, with *his* ears, who was he to talk? Setting down his brandy, he lit one of his few remaining cigars. "All right, folks?"

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Talk stopped; he had the floor. Everybody knew the situation but he skimmed it anyway. "So for now, we have to figure we're on our own. Except, if the *Deux* got offworld, and I don't see why not, Ivan should have it back here in a week or two. And if he circles down to spot us, which seems reasonable, he should catch our signal."

Sipping more brandy, he blew a smoke ring-and remembered when a younger Lisele always laughed and poked her finger through the hole. "But even if he does hear us," Tregare said, "what he can do about it depends on the *Tsa*-whether they're still around or not."

"And now, Bran," said Rissa, "you have a point to make?"

"No. A question to ask." He shrugged. "Goes without saying, we wait here as long as the *Deux* might still come looking-and a bit longer. Question is, if they *don't* come, what's our best bet?"

"What's your own guess?" said Hagen Trent. "You must have one."

Tregare grinned. "You first. Chairman gets the wrapup spot."

Shrugging, Trent said, "I see three choices, none good. Camp here indefinitely, undertake to raise this scoutship to launching attitude, or pack up and hike out. I'd like another alternative."

So would I. Tregare gave the nod to everyone in turn- Rissa, Jenise, Lisele and the two Shrakken. Sevshen didn't say anything; he rarely did. Tregare knew the alien understood human language, now, but he seldom used it. Stonzai said, "Not our world, this is. It we not know." Haltingly, then, she tried to explain something that at first Tregare didn't understand. It took some repetition.

After a time, though, he stopped her. "Stonzai-you say the swamp's drying up, farther out from here?" She signed assent. "And faster, as time passes?" The same sign: Tregare looked around the group. "Does that click, now, with anything else we know? Anybody?"

Rissa spoke. "This latitude gives rainy and dry seasons, only-the latter with much heat. The *Deux's* computer could inform us as to how orbital eccentricity and axial tilt affect those seasons. But I recall that at this time the planet is nearing its primary, not receding. So we must be entering a hotter, drier period."

"Yeah." It sounded right. "So pretty soon we could move out with a fair chance of making it to the mountains ahead of the

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next rains. The foothills, rather, where the jungle ends. Though maybe-" Tregare



grinned. "Jungle, outside this swamp, might be fit to live in. For a while, anyway."

Jenise Rorvik raised her good hand. "What we really want is to get back to Sassden, where we left the *Deux*. Clear across the mountains, though-too far, probably." She chewed her lip. "But wouldn't we have to be out of the jungle, to have much chance of sighting anything flying over, and being seen in return?"

"Even jungles have open spaces," Tregare said. "Usually, I mean; I can't vouch for this one yet."

Rissa cleared her throat. "Then you feel we should prepare ourselves, waiting for the swamp to become passable, against a trek toward the mountains? In case no rescue comes?"

"That's about it. We can't go yet, of course; I'm in no shape to hike on this leg, especially toting a pack. Jenise needs more time, too. But we might's well start getting ready. Including an exercise program, if we want to be in marching condition."

Hagen Trent looked about as annoyed as he ever got, so Tregare caught his gaze and nodded. The man said, "You're not even considering the chance of getting the scout upright, and flying out?"

"No." Pausing, Tregare thought how to say it. "Last time I was outside, I took a hard look and made a time estimate on that job."

"I'd like to hear it." Trent sounded obstinate.

"All right. Given solid ground, so the drive nodes wouldn't sink in the mud and blow us to plasma when we tried to lift, and given a moratorium on the next rains, so our work wouldn't be washed away when we were half-finished, my guess was four hundred days. And that was everybody working double shifts." He spread his hands. "And since we don't have solid ground and we do have to expect the rains again--"

Hagen's mouth puckered like a hurt child's. "Say no more; you're already into overkill. But how can you be so sure? I thought / was the engineer in this crowd."

"In a drive room, you are. But I built me a spaceport once. Not fancy-you remember it, Rissa. But I did learn how much work it takes to move dirt. Mud, I don't even want to find out about."

The water level did lower; the exposed path slowly dried. As hiking became feasible, everyone took daily workouts. Tregare

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discarded his crutch and nagged Rissa until she peeled the cast off him; then, face pale and teeth gritted, he practiced until he could walk without limping. It hurt like hell at first, but peace take him, he was going to be ready when the time came!

Occasionally, Hagen Trent bagged a tonguewalker. Now they boiled the sliced portions free of toxins, irradiated the meat to sterilize it, and packed it into sealed containers-that way it would keep without refrigeration.

"The hardest part," Tregare said, one day, "is figuring what to take along and what to leave." He waved a hand. "The scout's loaded with things we need, but we're limited to what we can carry." He scowled. "It's the choosing that drives me nuts."

He showed Rissa his list, marked with scribbled changes until it was barely legible. Running a finger down the page, she nodded. "A good start, Bran. From our food stores, mostly concentrated items, and nothing that duplicates what we can expect to find as we go." The finger stopped. "This second energy gun. A large one? But--"

"I thought about that a lot." Once discharged, the thing would be useless. And it weighed twice as much as the smaller ones-but it held nearly five times the charge, and could be set to discharge at the smaller-gun rate.

At his explanation, she nodded again. "Yes. But in the long run we shall have to depend on the needle guns. And the ammunition for those, in quantity, is heavy."

Tregare spread his hands. "*Everything's* heavy, when you add up enough to last us. But what choice do we have?"

The scout stocked backpacks, since its emergency function was as a lifeboat, and survivors can't count on coming groundside in settled country; drawing a habitable world at ail would be a bonus.

Tregare found a dozen packs, lightweight and sturdy. Leafing through the instruction sheets he saw how they hooked together so a person could carry one in front and one aft. It didn't look comfortable but he guessed it would work. In this heat, though...

Considering the number of packs they could take and the capacity of each, he checked down his list. The list far outran the capacities. Too discouraged to curse, he stood. Rissa called to him. "Time for lunch, Bran!" Realizing he'd been hungry for



some time but hadn't noticed, he turned and followed her to the control room.

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The rest were already eating. Nobody talked much, and that suited Tregare. When he was done-irritable, he skipped coffee- Rissa said, "Bran, I would like to show you something. Outside."

Again he followed her. Now, except for scattered daubs, the airlock was free of mud, and outdoors the footing was solid. She pointed forward, where a metal framework leaned against the scout.

"See?" He looked, and it didn't make much sense. A kind of ladder, more than two meters long and about three decimeters wide. But with rungs and diagonal braces both curved, convex downward, the way the thing was leaning. The sidepieces' upper ends were bent down to form handles; there, and spaced along the sidebars, eyebolts were fastened.

At the bottom the sidebars fastened to a metal sheet that curved up, as the bars did, in an arc of about a radian. Of sturdy weight, the sheet was corrugated, grooves parallel to the framework's length, and rounded at the free end. And the whole thing was put together with bolts and rivets, not welded.

Rissa's face had an expectant look. Puzzled, Tregare said, "I'll bite. What is it?"

"A travois, Bran. As used by the aborigines of North America. They lacked the wheel, you see, but a person or draft animal can drag a much greater load than could be carried. So I _"

"Peace be kept!" Turning, he grabbed and hugged her. "Rissa, I think you just put this outfit on a paying basis!" Now he inspected the device more carefully, asking questions and making an occasional suggestion. "At the shoulder harness we'll need a quick release, some kind of ripcord. So if a tonguewalker charges, for instance, a person can get out of the way fast."

Rissa agreed, and marked down a note. Hagen Trent came over to join them; Rissa said, "Tregare approves our work. Bran, Hagen designed the bracing, for best strength with least weight. And all the riveting is his work."

Tregare shook the man's hand. "Good on you, friend." He raised an eyebrow. "One question. *Why* the bolts and rivets?"

"Magnesium," said Rissa. When he still scowled, she added, "We are not on *Inconnu Deux*, with access to an inert-gas environment for welding." Tregare's palm slapped his forehead, and he laughed.

"Of course!" he said. "A nice big flare and a lot of smoke." Then he got down to business. First the three of them loaded packs, helter-skelter with whatever came to hand, to

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reasonable carrying weights. "Now," said Tregare, "we're going to test this out scientifically. Maybe not very, but some."

So each, carrying a pack, walked along the path to where the deep water began, and back. After resting, they all tried the travois over the same course with various loads, for comparison. The results-ratio of burdens for roughly the same effort-disappointed Tregare, and he said so.

"You're not looking at the whole picture," said Trent. "We figure on three of these gadgets. Consider *that* ratio, to six individuals playing packhorse, and see how it looks."

Tregare did, and he nodded. "It's better, all right."

"And the adults form two reliefs, Bran," said Rissa. "As well matched for strength as we can manage. While one team drags the travois, the other can walk unhampered."

"Yeah," Tregare said. "Everybody works only half the time. I like it." He grinned. "As of now, we all practice with this thing."

Back in the scout, reworking his list, Tregare felt better. He still couldn't take everything he'd like-not even a lot of things he was sure they'd need. But then he'd never really expected to. And at least the percentage had gone up now.

In case a travois broke-*take along extra bolts!*-or had to be abandoned, they'd still need the packs. So use them, on each travois, as stowage units. Of course there'd be extra stuff to be bundled separately; that was all right, too.

Loading. Heavier things at the rear, the bottom of a travois; let the ground, not the person, argue with gravity. On level terrain and solid footing, anyway; crossing submerged patches it might be better the other way around. And don't forget some



inflatable buoyancy bags; crossing water, they'd make all the difference.

The bottom skid, smooth curved metal, grooved in the direction of travel, should help with friction and slippage. Good enough; for the first time, Tregare felt that things might actually *work*.

So at dinner he was in a mood for conversation. Lisele obliged him, telling how a tonguwalker had got away, and what its escape had shown to her and Stonzai. "She hit it good with the needlegun; she really did. And we dodged, one to each side the way we do now, so it couldn't make up its mind. But it kept going somehow-plowed through all that thick brush and into the water." Looking exasperated, the child sighed. "Almost ten

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meters out, before it sank. The water's too deep there; we couldn't get it."

But from the water's edge, the girl and the Shrakken saw a part of the island that was new to them. "A little ridge that goes out from the far end. Never saw it before, because you'd have to cut through some really heavy bush to get there. I bet it's above water all the time; there's lots of stuff growing on it. But anyway-"

The thing was that this ridge curved off to the right, toward the mountains. Whereas the trail they knew, forward of the scout, began parallel to those mountains and slanted away from them.

"Good observation, Lisele... Stonzai," Tregare said. "Tomorrow we'll go hack some brush and take a better look."

Leading his daughter and Stonzai past the scout toward the island, Tregare decided his leg was almost serviceable. When he told Lisele, though, she wanted to race, and he had to pass the offer.

Once they passed the high point of the island's low ridge, he dropped back and let the child lead. "Which way, now?"

She pointed ahead, into a dense thicket. "It's that direction, the ridge. But off here to the left is where we can see it from."

The tonguwalker's plunge had pushed the brush aside; they shoved their way through the narrow passage. Short of the waterline, Tregare turned and saw the ridge Lisele had mentioned. He stopped, and she bumped into him from behind. "Just a minute, princess."

"But we're not there yet."

"I can see from here." He looked back, then ahead again. "Trying to figure the shortest way to cut through this jungle and get to that ridge." After a moment, he shrugged. "Here's as good a place as any. Stay behind me now, both of you."

He pulled out his energy gun, the smaller model, and crouched down. Level with the ground and close to it, he burned a swathe through the brush ahead. Thick, it grew; even cut off at ground level, the bushes hung in place. Stepping forward, Tregare lifted the severed plants and tossed them aside. A few meters along, he had to stop and crouch again, and do another burn. And another, a little later, that got them down to where the narrow ridge left the island.

Looking along that ridge, Tregare's gaze followed past the next grove of trees and caught the line beyond, curving to the

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right. Toward rising ground, too, as far as he could see in this morning's haze. And over there, the foliage looked to be a lighter color. Remembering what Skandith had said, riding the scoutship on its way to Shtegel, Tregare made a guess: that within about two kilometers, this patch of swamp gave way to ordinary jungle.

Of course, he reminded himself, this was only the first patch.

Turning, he told Lisele and Stonzai his thoughts. The girl said, "Then we won't have to fight mud all the way, and worry about water monsters?"

Tregare chuckled. "Well, I'd hope not. And with jungle terrain being higher than swamp, maybe we can spot swamp country coming up and try to avoid it."

They began walking back. As they reached the island's crest, from a cloudless, hazy sky the thunder came. Just ahead was a small clearing; ignoring stabs of pain from his leg, Tregare ran there, and looked up. Something, he saw-high and fast, too far away to name, and for an instant his vision blurred. Shaking his head, he turned. Lisele stood, eyes wide and blinking slowly. Stonzai lay huddled, arms around her head. He went to her.



"You all! right?" She moaned, and said something in her own language. The only word Tregare recognized was "Tsa."

"Yeah. That's what I thought." Kneeling, he tried to work her arms free; she moaned again, then let him straighten them. Her face turned upward; the triangular eyes opened. "You hurt, Stonzai?"

"Hurt, yes. But get up, can." Lisele helped him get the Shrakken to her feet. Her first steps were shaky, but she said, "Walk now, can." Still, Tregare decided to keep a slow pace.

He looked to his daughter. "You haven't said-did you feel much of anything? Except that things blurred, a second, I didn't."

The girl frowned. "I'm not sure. Something-like fingers touching me and pulling back. Only in my *head*." She shook that head, and gave a little skip. "But it didn't hurt. Not any."

"Me either. I wonder-" And back at the scout, he got everyone together and took a poll. Trent and Jenise, outside for travois practice, had seen the ship a longer time than Tregare had-and both felt pain as well as disorientation. Rissa, inside, wasn't sure she'd felt anything at all. "I was concentrating. By the time I noticed the sound, it had nearly gone."

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Stonzai and Sevshen talked; then she reported. He *too* had been inside, but the sound made him think of Tsa, and pain struck. Unlike Stonzai, though, he hadn't been knocked off his feet.

Tregare related his group's experiences, then said, "Do the differences give us any ideas?" And after a pause: "Jenise, Hagen-did the pain begin as soon as you saw the ship?"

Not exactly, it turned out. Their first reactions had been like those of Tregare and Lisele; then one of them had said, "The Tsa?" "And as soon as I got scared," Jenise said now, "the pain hit. It didn't last long, though." Trent's report was similar, except that his reaction had been anger, not fear.

"All right," said Tregare. "The Tsa have to be some sort of telepaths, and it looks as if it pays not to notice them, to think of them *as* Tsa when they're in range. And especially, not to have any kind of hostile reaction."

"But how can we help it?" Jenise's face showed strain.

Rissa shook her head. "I have no answer. It is impossible, normally, to *refrain* from thinking of something by act of will."

Trent leaned forward. "Look-think of dealing with a mean dog. If you act-movements, tone of voice, all of it-as if the dog's going to behave itself, like as not, it will." He looked around. "I've done it. Has anyone else, here?"

Tregare said, "Sure. Same with people, too, sometimes." Elbows on the table, he steepled his fingers. "What you're saying-if we think of the Tsa mental touch as harmless, maybe it will be?"

Above Stonzai's eyes the stubby tendrils quivered. "The Tsa, not to fear, not to hate? *How* do I that?"

"That," said Rissa, "is the difficulty. In a group, if only one falters and succumbs, the Tsa strike will likely reach all, if contact lasts any time. The Shrakken are most vulnerable; having suffered Tsa attacks for so long, the fear and hate are reflex to them."

"Where we've only had it twice," said Tregare. "But I think that reflex wouldn't take much reinforcement, to set in solid. Today I didn't have the problem; the Tsa were gone before I had time to guess what they were. But in the general case-" He shrugged. "Trent, I think this is a meaner breed of dog than what we're used to."

Before dinner, Trent announced that it was time to remove Jenise's cast. "If you're going to need, a brace on that wrist,

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Rorvik, we want some time here-before we leave-to experiment and find out what works best for you."

So with Rissa helping, he took the casing off. Tregare knew he wasn't going to like what he saw, and he was right. Wrist and lower palm were discolored and misshapen, with lumps and hollows that didn't belong there, and ridged with angry-looking scars. Looking, Jenise Rorvik whimpered.

"Try moving it," said Trent. Tregare watched; together, like a mitten, the fingers moved slightly. The thumb flexed better, but without strength. Trying to bend the wrist itself, Jenise went pale.



She tried moving a light object along the table, and stopped. "No!" At Trent's urging she pushed from a different angle, but no bending stress on that wrist was bearable to her.

Tears ran down her face. "You should have taken the hand off!"

Softly, Rissa spoke. "That is not, I believe, what you wanted at the time. And if we ever rejoin *Inconnu Deux*-"

"We never will! You can't believe that, still?"

The two faced each other, Jenise glaring from tear-filled eyes while Rissa's stayed wide and solemn. "I have to believe it."

Tregare cleared his throat. "She needs a brace, all right. Trent, can you make something that's light and strong, and can be taken off fairly easy, for washing up? What's in the kit?"

Rummaging through the supplies, Rissa brought out several items. "This, Hagen, and-"

"Right." The man set to work. When he was done, the layered bracing had a slim contour. Jenise's fingers were left bare past the knuckles, and the thumb entirely free, but the wrist was held rigidly. "See how that works. And exercise those digits."

Now, at least, she could apply pressure with the hand, without wincing. "That's a lot better; thanks, Hagen. And I *will* try to get more use of my thumb and fingers."

At dinner, though, the thumb wasn't strong enough to hold a fork or spoon firmly.

The last day passed, that the *Deux* should have shown up if Tregare's plan had gone well. They waited ten more. Supplies were packed, except that people kept thinking of something else they needed, and Tregare had to make choices. He stepped up the exercise program. His own leg wasn't fully back to strength

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yet, but he figured he could keep up well enough. Sure as peace, he'd try.

Regarding stores to be left behind, economy went by the boards. At meals they gorged on the choicest tidbits. "Might's well live it up while we can," Tregare said. "Later we'll get our fill of concentrates and local weeds and boiled tongue walker." He poured himself more wine; none of that was going with them, either. Two liters of medicinal alcohol, but no wine.

Tregare sighed. He *liked* wine.

The group was quiet tonight, absorbed in thought or in last-minute preparations. Tregare looked again down his thrice-recopied list, and hoped they'd get out of here before he made it illegible enough to need a fourth copying. He checkmarked some items he'd added today. Spare micropile for the water purifier... right. Double the allowance for Stonzai's anti-ovulation pills; take all of them along, not just half. Because the more Tregare thought about it, the more it struck him that the last thing they needed, out in the boonies, was an instinct-maddened Snrakken breathing out zombie gas and needing a nice fat human grub to feed her larvae!

Maybe just a *few* kilos of goodie-foods. Question mark. Well, why not? The stuff would be used up in the first few days, lightening the load. He erased the question mark.

Checking further, he paused twice, then decided to stick with what he'd written. At some point, he reflected, you had to quit shuffling, and firm things up.

Their last night on the scout Tregare looked around. By now, the upended control room seemed positively like home.

He caught Rissa's gaze and raised one eyebrow; she nodded. Saying nothing, they got up and climbed into the dorm area and past it to the drive room. This, now that Jenise lived in Control with them, was the only place Rissa and Tregare could have privacy. Two acceleration pads helped. He held her. "Let's spend all night here."

"Bran-we do need some sleep."

"Sure. But not all that much."

She laughed. "Yes. I think the need will regulate itself."

When pre-dawn glow tinged the edge of sky, the group set out. Tregare looked once at the open airlock, no way to close it. Then he turned ahead, and didn't look back again.

They crossed Lisele's island to the low, narrow ridge she'd found. First they walked with water on each side; Tregare kept

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glancing one way and then the other, wondering if the stuff was deep enough to harbor the huge leech-beasts. Then, skirting a grove of swamp-rooted trees, the ridge turned



"west" toward the mountains. Now it ran fairly straight, into the light-colored area, ahead in the haze, that Tregare guessed to be jungle.

He was right; about three kilos from the scout, the ridge merged into a larger version of Lisele's island. How much larger, they weren't sure; by noon they were still climbing. Not for the highest part, but to avoid the thicker shoreline growth. They tried to follow a sort of path, but it kept dividing into indistinct trails that sometimes petered out. Tonguewalkers-or what else? Tregare shrugged, and made sure his gun was free in the holster.

So far, the travois system worked fine. Tregare traded his off with Hagen Trent, Rissa with Jenise, and Stonzai with Sevshen-while Lisele carried a light pack. Rissa had the hardest of it; Jenise, it turned out early, couldn't handle her full shift. Tregare thought he had an answer. Trent, Rissa and Sevshen had just done their stints; now, after a rest pause, Tregare, Jenise and Stonzai would take over. Well, if Rissa was stronger than Jenise, Tregare-bad leg or no bad leg-had weight and muscle on Hagen Trent. He looked down at Rissa's travois and began to unfasten one carrier pack.

"Bran-what are you doing?" Rissa sat up straight.

"Lie back, honey. Just equalizing things a little. You can haul more than Jenise, and I can tote more than I've got, no sweat. So every stop, we'll just shift this pack back and forth."

"Why bother?" Lying back, hands behind his head, Trent drawled the words. "If you can haul it, I can, too."

Tregare wasn't so sure, but he caught Rissa's scowl. "All right; we'll try it." *Peace take people who always have to prove something!* He thought fast, and said, "Come to think, there's no reason we can't shift load components any time somebody turns up a little tired or off the feed. I mean, nobody's going to have *all* good days." And he saw Trent relax.

Time to move again; quicker than Tregare expected, everyone was ready. Following their same general route, after a time they passed the highest ground. But through the trees, Tregare couldn't see ahead much. Stopping, he raised a hand, and pointed. "I'm going up there. Try to get a better look, see what's ahead." He unhooked the travois, set it down, and walked slowly up the hill.

He still couldn't see much-too many trees. He walked to one, thinking to climb it, but his first effort stabbed at the leg.

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He cursed under his breath, and turned downhill. "Anybody want to come up and climb a tree for me?"

Lisele shed her pack and came running. Tregare told her what he wanted to know, and added, "Be careful, princess."

"Yes. AH right." She went up that tree like a squirrel; soon, among the thick branches, she was out of sight. Finally, nearly as fast as she'd gone up, she descended. Catching her breath, she pointed. "That way." A bit to the right, Tregare noted. "Another kilo or so, then it's all swamp except one narrow part, light-colored like jungle. There's some thick haze out there a way, so I can't tell for sure-but *looks* like maybe the good part goes all the way through to another piece of high ground. Lots bigger than this one."

Not solid data, maybe, but the best he was going to get. Tregare nodded. "Good work, Lisele; thanks." Then they walked back down-Lisele skipping ahead sometimes-and rejoined the others. And got moving again.

The winding ridge did go all the way through, but daylight failed before they reached the next land mass. The unburdened used their handlamps to help guide the travois-haulers and watch for dangers to the sides. Once off the ridge, climbing through dense brush, Tregare stopped. "This heavy thicket, to the right. Let's clear a space and make camp." Using the lighter energy gun, as he'd done on Lisele's island, he carved a small clearing. The cutdown bushes were packed around the perimeter and into the entrance, to block it. "Not much of a stockade," Tregare said, "but better than nothing." And once Rissa and Trent had built a cookfire, the group settled in cheerfully enough.

One day, thought Tregare, after dinner and before sleep. How many hundreds more?

XVI. IVAN



The problem with the Hoyfarul

Drive, said Jeremy Crowfoot, was a lack of components to beef up the lock circuits, and hold the drive field coherent. But one day he had another idea. "Feed all the exciters from one source, using power stages for isolation. Nobody's ever done it that way, but let's try." So Ivan followed him down to Drive, and listened while he and Peleter and Melaine Holmbach worked to haywire the place.

Afterward-after something blew up and left the drive room stinking of burnt insulation-Ivan got up from where the blast had sent him diving, reflexively, for safety, and brushed at himself. Other hands were there to help. Ivan said, "Is the normal drive still working all right?"

"Uh, yes." Crowfoot sounded embarrassed. "It's still a good idea, Ivan. Simply-well, the time delays on the different feeds seem to need finer tuning." His voice trailed off. "If we have enough spares left, to rebuild that configuration."

Reaching out, Ivan found the man's shoulder and gripped it. "Nice try, anyway, Jere." He turned away. "I think I'll go lie down for a little while. Explosions give me a headache."

Declining help, he groped his own way to quarters. Dacia wasn't there; he remembered she'd planned a little extra simulation work. Tired, discouraged after the drive-room fiasco, Ivan showered, had a heavier drink than he usually allowed himself, and lay down to nap.

Some fairly aggressive cuddling woke him. He yawned, and mumbled, "Dacia? Maybe you have a good thought there." He turned to hold her, and no clothes were in the way. He managed a kiss.

"Mmmmm?" Well, if she didn't need words, neither did he. More quickly than usual, skipping their ordinary rituals, he

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joined with her. That part went faster, too; why were they in such a hurry?

When it was done, she nudged him gently to one side and moved away across the room. Already dozing again, he heard her in the bath-cubby. Her touch brought him nearly awake again. "Very good," she whispered, and then she was gone. Or else he was ...

Next time he woke, Dacia was kissing him, and this time she used words, too. "Miss me? I've missed you, and I think it's about time." Her hands moved on him.

Suddenly he sat up. "Dacia-isn't it a little too soon?" He laughed. "After all, I'm only superhuman!"

Her hands stopped. "Too soon? Nearly three days?" A pause. "Well, I know you've been working hard, but I thought-"

"Dacia, what time is it?" She told him; thinking back, he made a quick estimate. "Less than an hour ago you were here, and we-"

Her hands left him; when she spoke, he knew she was standing. "I was *not* here. Except for galley breaks, I've been in Control the past nine hours!" She sounded angry, but not very.

Ivan shook his head. "Then who was it? Because I-"

And then Dacia began to giggle. "That's a good question, isn't it?"

Maybe Dacia was amused, but Ivan wasn't. There was something humiliating about having his blindness used to deceive him.

"Well," said Dacia, still chuckling now and then no matter how he frowned, "you do have to take the incident as a compliment."

"Maybe." He grugged the word. "*Who*, though?" Not Alina, surely; she and Anders favored a fairly strict grade of monogamy. But still-no, Alina's hair was long. He'd stroked that woman's, and noticed no difference from the shortish cut Dacia wore. With Ellalee he wouldn't have, probably; curlier, maybe, but not by much. The other one, though. "Dacia. The woman down in *Drive*, Holmbach. What's her haircut like? How long, I mean?"

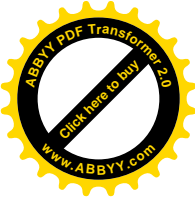
"Oh-" Dacia paused, then said, "You've eliminated Alina, then, on that basis? Well, I'd say Holmbach's still in the running."

He sat up, feet over the side of the bed to rest on the floor. "Get her up here, will you?"

"Why? What do you want to say to her?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

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"Then until you do, why don't you leave it alone?" She sat and hugged him, head on his shoulder. "I know what bothers you-being *fooled*, that way. But it's not as if she did something *mean*, whoever it was." She nibbled at his ear. "Is it, now?"

"I guess not." He hated the whiny way his voice sounded, then, so he tried to change it. "Let's go up and eat, shall we?"

"All right. I think it's Jeremy's stint as chef."

Ivan shrugged. "Who cares? We can cook our own."

The next couple of days he considered putting himself into one-to-one situations with his suspects, asking clever questions and getting one of them to betray guilty knowledge and give her game away. Dacia laughed him out of the idea. "She'll be two jumps ahead of you, if she wants to be. If she doesn't, she'll likely come and tell you of her own accord."

They were both wrong. For over a week nothing happened, and every time Ivan was in company with either woman he felt foolish and ineffectual. Then one day, hurrying too much, on the stairs he slipped and fell, and bruised one hip. Getting up, he limped off to quarters. And heard someone behind him, following.

He pretended not to notice; inside, he didn't lock the door. He stripped, and turned the shower as hot as he could stand it, to soak the ache loose. Out and dried, when he clambered into bed he wasn't surprised to find somebody else there. Somebody female.

He touched a specific part of her body, and because of a certain thing Dacia had done and this woman hadn't, he knew she wasn't Dacia. His hand moved; he gripped one shoulder and held her down. "All right. Who? And why?"

Her breathing sounded calm enough. Her voice, a whisper, gave away no identity. "I came to tell you. Any time we talked, lately, you seemed nervous. And that's not what-I mean, all I wanted, before, was to do something nice. Because you picked me, Captain."

It took him a minute to remember; then he eased his grip on her, and nodded. "Melaine Holmbach, then?"

"Yes." Two almost silent breaths; then she spoke in a voice he could recognize.

"You still sound angry. Why?"

"Because-look! To use a blind man's darkness, to fool him, makes *him feet* like a fool, and helpless." She moved; her hair brushed his arm and he knew she was shaking her head. Without intention his lips found her forehead, and suddenly he felt that somehow he was in the wrong. He kissed her. "It's all right now."

"Then can we, again, Captain? Let's!"

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Well, it wasn't as if Dacia had shown resentment, the other time. But after, when Melaine was ready to leave, he said, "I understand, now, and I'm glad we've pleased each other. But the way things are, here on the snip, I think this had better be all of it."

Against his fingers beside her head, he felt Melaine nod. "If you say so, Captain." Under his wrist her shoulder moved. A shrug? Probably. "I suppose I may as well take up Rancee Peleter's offer. He's a kindly man-and I don't really mind that he's shorter."

By intent, he was up and dressed when Dacia came in. Waiting, he'd thought about the inevitable pairing process. When he chose people to stay awake he hadn't thought about a balance of sexes; now he was a little surprised to realize that everything came out even. He'd paid even less heed to his people's off-duty doings; unable to see, he observed no clues to draw his interest. Now he wondered, and grinned at himself.

"Nosy!"

"Who?" His voice had covered the sound of Dacia's entrance.

"Hi. Oh, nothing important. Except, Melaine visited me again."

"Again? Then the mystery's solved?"

She sounded interested but not concerned, so he said, "I told her, this is the last time," and mentioned the remark about Peleter.

"You were considerate, Ivan, not to turn her away." He heard no sarcasm, and now she hugged him. "You didn't have to end it with her, you know-but I'm glad you did. I'm not horribly possessive, but I am a little bit." She left him and took a fast shower. When she came back, she said, "And who were you calling 'nosy', Ivan?"

Grinning, he said, "Melaine got me curious. As to how our four unattached peas are rattling around in this pod. That's all."

"Well-" Pausing, she clicked her tongue twice, then began. The duty situation governed, she thought-Peleter and Holmbach in Drive, Ellalee in Control, Crowfoot



working both places. "I don't know about the drive room, but topside Jeremy hasn't given Ellalee much of a play." Cloth rustled; she was probably dressing. "And Ellalee herself-if her eyes are on anyone, it's usually you."

She chuckled. "That's why I wasn't making any bets about your mysterious visitor."

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Why he should feel embarrassed, Ivan wasn't sure. But he did, "My stomach says it's time to eat. Shall we go?" "If that's the best offer I'm going to get, let's do."

Dacia no longer needed to feed him. She cut the meat for him, then he'd locate each bite between knife and fork before spearing it with the fork. No doubt there were better ways, but he couldn't think of one and nobody here had any ideas for him.

Vegetables were chancier and salads impossible, until he thought of using tongs. They might have been handier for meat, too, but he'd mastered the fork and stubbornly stayed with it. As for "spoon vittles," his skill left something to be desired, but with a big napkin tucked into his collar he used the spoon anyway. He was finishing a bowl of stew when Jeremy Crowfoot greeted him. "Join you?"

"Sure, sit down. Coffee? Or have you eaten yet?"

"Nothing right now." With his schedule about a radian out of phase with Ivan's, the man was between mealtimes. "Business," he said.

"Let's have it," and Crowfoot began. The gist was that he and Peleter had scrounged up enough parts for one more try at activating the FTL drive. But if it blew again...

"We'd be short on spares for *normal* drive. And this far out, we can't afford the risk."

Ivan shrugged. "So we don't try it. Right?"

"Not right." Because there was more to the situation. On the last FTL try, the haywire had held together for more than thirty seconds. "And the monitors show that for at least twenty, we were beating light. Running so close already, it didn't take much to put us over. Ivan-why didn't the watch mention that?"

Ivan thought back. "They said the instruments blinked out briefly, but then came the explosion, and the ship bucking-I guess nobody thought to evaluate what really happened." Ellalee would have had the duty then-or Alina, maybe. Neither of them had enough training to figure something like that, coming unexpected.

Sighing, Ivan leaned forward. "Okay; let's hear the new idea."

"We go ahead and rebuild the setup-with tighter synchronization of the time-delay paths-but we don't test it."

Puzzled, Ivan said, "If we don't even know it works, what good is it?"

"Ace in the hole, at Shaarbant. Meanwhile, if we need any

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of the spare components to repair normal drive, we have them. If we don't have to use them, we still keep the FTL option open."

Slowly, Ivan nodded. Crowfoot went on. "At Shaarbant, all we need is, to get above light. *Barely* above light, and we can do it by running the FTL section in short bursts, too short to allow instability to build to blowup. I can key that control to the instruments that monitor the vulnerable stages. That way, you see-

"It shuts down before it blows, yeah. So we lose FTL for *then*, but not the capacity for it later." Then Ivan frowned. "One thing you may have missed. Switching the drive field between coherent and acoherent phases very much-won't that heat up the circuits that feed the shaping nodes?"

Silence, then Crowfoot said, "Damn it, you're right." His feet moved on the deck; his voice came from higher up. "Back to the old drawing board; I'll have to add more safety interlocks, to shut off the Hoyfarul circuitry at *any* overload. Or-" He sounded hesitant. "Would you rather I drop the whole project?"

"Hell, no." Ivan didn't have to think twice; Crowfoot's morale depended on this thing; so did Peleter's, maybe. "Go ahead." He laughed. "Somehow, Jere, I don't think you're done having good ideas."

But when the man had gone, Ivan felt depressed. It must have shown; Dacia patted his hand. By reflex his head turned back and forth, to see if anyone was in eavesdropping distance. Feeling sheepish, he asked Dacia. "No," she said. "No one's near. Why?"

"Sooner or later I have to announce this, but I prefer later. Dacia-I've hoped, like everybody else, that we'd get back to FTL. Well, we won't, except maybe briefly at Shaarbant, a tactical gimmick."



"So?" He imagined her brows arching.
"You forget your earlier training? No-I'm sorry. Look, though. The other day, Alina ran me some calculations. Just the numbers and instructions; I didn't say what they were about." She squeezed his hand; he turned his blind stare away from her. "We're making a good clip now, in STL terms. In weeks we'll be back. *Our* weeks."
She gasped, and he said, "Yeah. At twenty to one, roughly, we're chewing time. Any idea how long this trip's taking, by Shaarbant's clocks?" He told her, and again her breath made sound.
"But then-?" She didn't say any more.
"That's right, Dacia. It's *years*, we're talking about. Whatever is happening on Shaarbant, win or lose, by the time we get there it'll all be settled."
She was only sniffing a little, not crying aloud, but he had

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her lead him to their quarters where she could do it in privacy. He resented Melaine Holmbach a little, then, because lovemaking would have been the best comfort, and he simply wasn't ready again, yet.

XVII Lisele

It was the growing heat that slowed
them down. Lisele wasn't bothered too much; one day Hagen Trent, feet shuffling as he pulled the travois, half-cuffed and half-caressed her head, saying, "Kids! They could live in hell and have fun."

Jenise Rorvik, gaunt and hollow-eyed, turned and said, "Where do you think we are *now*?" Then Rissa made a mild joke; everybody else laughed a little, but Jenise didn't.

Shaarbant was still coming closer to its sun; that's what Tregare said. Nobody was sure how long before it began moving away again, but for now the heat kept getting worse. At first they'd been able to move all day, with rests. But pretty soon they began stopping well before sunset, cutting brush for shade and lying quiet. They tried moving by dark, but the third night something jumped on Hagen Trent and clawed him some before Tregare got a clear shot at it against moonlight. Nobody got a good look at the thing; it leaped into the dense brush and got away. Tregare said it probably didn't get very far, but the undergrowth was too heavy; next morning even Trent said it wasn't worth wasting energy charges to find the beast. With the bandages, and limping, he didn't look too good that day. He kept up, though.

After another week or so they only walked until mid-afternoon, and a time later they were stopping at noon, and now they could barely keep going until mid-morning. If it got much worse...

Early on, they tried to avoid swamp except to hunt

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tongue walkers, but now swamp was usually the only place to find extra water. The little dew-stills gave nearly enough for drinking, but not quite. The plant stems helped, if you could stand the taste, but the stems unconstipated you too much, if you chewed very many.

The only good time for walking, now, was from false dawn to when the sun got high enough to "turn on the furnace," as Tregare said-and every day the furnace came on earlier. Twilight was no good; the heat stayed long after dark closed in. So each day they made less distance.

One morning, Jenise just lay there. "Leave me and go on. I'm going to die anyway; why put myself through any more of this agony?" Sounding quite sane, Rorvik pointed out that here she had shade and water, "... and you can spare me a *few* days' food, can't you?" When she said that, she smiled.

Tregare looked as if he was going to hit her, but Rissa caught at his arm. "Bran-



she cannot help it. She is worn down, below the level of sustaining purpose."

Scowling like a man ready to kill, still Tregare looked down and patted Rissa's hand. Sprouting beard masked the lines of his face, but Lisele saw how his mouth was set. "All right. We'll do it another way."

They left the camp too late to benefit from any cool at all. Drugged into quiet, Jenise lay strapped to the travois Tregare hauled. Part of its former load was on Stonzai's. And in place of Jenise, Lisele struggled under the burden of the third travois.

Including pauses to rest and trade off loads, they pushed ahead for over an hour before the heat reached the level that usually stopped them. Panting, sweat running from his face, Tregare said, "We're done; we can't do much more of this." He looked around; Lisele looked, too, and wondered if he saw everyone the same as she did. Hagen Trent seemed shrunken, as if something had sucked the jukes out of him. Tregare himself might have had fires inside, raging to burst out. Days ago, Rissa's face had gone tight; it showed nothing of what she might feel. And the two Shrakken-there was no way to read their expressions, and there never had been.

Until her father squinted at her, it didn't occur to Lisele to wonder how *she* looked. She was tired, sure, and hot-if she let her legs tighten up at all, they began to shake. Her body's hunger for strength had nothing to do with her stomach. But she'd kept up, hadn't she? Nobody had to wait for her!

"No, princess; nobody did." Then she knew she'd said it

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out loud, and felt silly. But Tregare managed a kind of grin. "After today, though, we can't go on. Not until this damned planet passes perihelion and starts cooling off."

"Here?" Rissa said. "Without water?" From her voice, she might have been asking if he wanted another piece of meat.

He shook his head, moved his shoulders. "Course not." He pointed ahead, to the slope they were rounding. "Swamp ahead. Not more than two kilos, likely. Saw it when we crossed the high part. That's where the water is-so that's where we go. Now, today-no matter *how* peacetwisting hot it gets! And then, there we stay."

Staring at him, Rissa shrugged. "If you have a kilo of travois-pulling left in you this day, then so do I."

Trent looked as if he'd been kicked in the gut, but he clambered to his feet. "My turn, Tregare, to pull that thing."

In the worst heat Lisele had yet known, they set off. She couldn't get her breath, and twice felt herself half-fainting, beginning to fall. If she did, though...

No! She saw Trent stagger, and forced her own shaking legs to take one firm step after another. When she did fall, for seconds she thought she was still walking. In red haze, she couldn't tell where anything was, except the ground against her.

She knew she wasn't crying, but her face was wet. Her eyes opened; she saw Rissa, a damp rag in one hand, looking down at her. Her head lay in her mother's lap. "I'm sorry; I-I slipped, I guess."

"You wore yourself down to a nubbin, Lisele; that's what you did. I should have watched you more carefully." For the first time in days, Lisele saw Rissa smile. "Basically you are all right; your pulse is good and your breathing is normal for this heat. When we continue, however, Stonzai will take the travois, while Sevshen relieves her on the heavier one."

Lisele tried to sit up. "I can do it!"

"Not today, duckling. Working yourself to collapse-for now, once is enough. Later you will have other chances-many of them."

Past Rissa, Lisele saw Tregare's face; his expression didn't show his thoughts. He shook his head, and said only, "I guess you get it from both sides of the family."

In a little while the group was up and moving again. Even without the travois, now, Hagen Trent had trouble keeping pace. Lisele angled over to walk beside him. He looked at her without

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seeming to see her, until he stumbled and she grasped his elbow; then he glared and pulled away. "What you doing? / don't need help."

"Please, Hagen. If you fall, somebody's got to pick you up. Like they did me."

He muttered a curse; then his arm went around her shoulder, and he said, "Know something? One thing I can't stand, it's a smart-off kid-but sometimes you make a lot



of sense."

He tried not to put much weight on her; she could tell that. But before they got down to the water, he was leaning about as heavily as she could handle.

Twenty meters back from the water-a little more, maybe- a steep bank rose. A gully cut the bank, and that's how they went down. To their left a big tree stood, with some of its roots buried in the cliff and some arching down in air, making a shallow cave under the main trunk. "Not perfect," said Tregare, "but it'll do for bivouac until things cool off." He checked his chronometer. "I'll take first watch. You next, Stonzai. Two hours; all right?"

Even with the heat stifling her, once Lisele lay down it didn't take her long to go to sleep.

Rissa's touch woke her; she blinked at the red sun, just grazing the horizon. The smell of food, cooking, brought her more awake. Stretching stiff muscles, she got up to have dinner with the rest, sitting around a fire of small wood. Everybody sat well back from its heat, but after the dark closed in, the fire's light let her see far enough to feel reasonably safe.

Evenings had been quiet, lately; nobody had energy for talk. But now Rissa said, "Bran? We have as much relief from heat, tonight, as we can expect. Perhaps you should now announce your plan."

"Sure. Why not?" Looking almost like his normal self, Tregare stood. "We built us a kind of little fort, here. You see-" He pointed, and shone his handlamp; Lisele began to see what he meant.

Then he said, "Rissa's right; it's cooled off as much, tonight, as it's going to. So now's a good time to start building."

By the light of handlamps, Lisele saw branches and entire trees cut by Tregare's energy gun and come crashing down. Too heavy to move, those fallen things, until Tregare or Hagen cut them smaller. But then, everybody helping, a

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respectable barricade was built. "Not high enough," Tregare said, "but it will be."

Two days later he was satisfied. Then they put the roof on-mostly heavy-foliaged branch-ends, but those lay over a lattice of strong boughs spaced close enough that no tonguewalker could squeeze through. Or anything else, big enough to cause much trouble. That's what Tregare said, and Lisele thought he probably had it right.

Waiting miserably through Shaarbant's perihelion, the group had a few nasty surprises. No one had thought that tonguewalkers might come in smaller sizes, but they did. When a clutch of them squeezed down through the roof, nearly everybody got burned by the acid tentacles before the things were killed. Then Rissa and the two Shrakken wove thinner, pliant branches into the ceiling, leaving no opening big enough to let the creatures through. The irony was that once the place was secure, no more of the animals turned up. "Migrating, maybe," Tregare said.

The heat was worse than ever, but if you didn't have much work to do, you could get used to it. Especially if, as Lisele, you practiced alpha-state meditation a lot. Besides helping with normal camp chores, Lisele's only job was to go scouting-with Stonzai's gun to guard them both-for plants to eat. Every morning they set out at false dawn, using handlamps until true dawn came.

As time passed, they had to range farther for good forage, and one morning they crossed a point of land and heard a gurgling sound. Pushing ahead through a thicket, Lisele came to a running stream, about two meters across-the first water she'd seen since the scout crashed, that wasn't swamp and didn't *smell* like swamp.

Lisele was tired of smelling like swamp, herself, from bathing in a stagnant pool while somebody stood by with a gun. Mostly, everyone scrubbed off with fine sand-sometimes, to feel halfway clean, they just had to bathe in water.

The stream was cooler to her hand than she expected. Cupping her palm, she scooped up a little water; it tasted fine. Quickly, as Stonzai approached, Lisele slipped off the light slacks and blouse she wore against scratchy brush, kicked loose her sandals and stepped into the stream. It felt so *good*; with a splash, she sat down, and then lay flat. She ducked her head under for a moment, then sat up and began rinsing her short hair.

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Grown out from stubble now, it was almost long enough to need a comb.

She ducked under again, came up, and rubbed some more. Stonzai, looking down at her, suddenly pointed, yelling words Lisele didn't understand. Then something struck her thigh. It felt like fire, and without meaning to, she shrieked-shrieked, and tore with her hands at a grey thing that flopped in the water and sent agony up her leg.

A hand gripped her shoulder; she was yanked up and then she landed on dirt, flat on her back with the wind knocked out of her. Stonzai's gun gave a ripping hiss; something clawed at her right thigh where it hurt worst, and then the pain eased a little.

Struggling to get up, she managed to prop herself on one elbow and could see what was happening. Not flopping now, burned nearly in half, the grey thing lay to one side. She looked at her leg. Dark blood ran from a cluster of wounds at the front of her thigh, toward the inside, a handsbreadth from the groin. And as she watched, the area began to swell and darken.

With a high, keening wail, Stonzai put her mouth to the bleeding punctures, spat discolored blood and repeated the act. A half-dozen times, until the blood that came, looked normal. Slowly the darkened patch of flesh began to clear at the edges; the swelling didn't leave but it stopped spreading. Pain settled down to throbbing ache; Lisele found she was biting her lip, and that now she could stop doing it.

She took a deep, ragged breath. "Thanks, Stonzai. What *was* it?"

"Poison out, to get," the Shrakken said.

"Yes-yes, I know, and I thank you. I meant, the creature-?"

Stonzai gestured; on her hands and one knee, the hurt leg trailing, Lisele moved to see. The grey thing was about a meter long, and as thick as the thigh it had attacked-wormlike, with a sort of flipper at the tail. At the front she saw no eyes, only a cluster of leechlike sucking mouths. She nodded, and said, "Yes. Stonzai, remember the big water beast we told you about, our first day in the swamp?"

"Remember, yes. See, though, not."

"Well, you have now; this is just like it, only smaller. We'd better take it back, to show everybody."

Stonzai touched the injured leg. "Walk, you can?"

"I think I ought to try." Being helped up, she couldn't hold back a moan. Then, standing, she held still and the pain ebbed.

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Not in her face, but somehow in the way she stood, the Sharakken looked concerned. "Carry you, must I, yes."

Lisele was tempted, but shook her head. "You need your gun hand free. Wait a second." Leaning on Stonzai and keeping her leg stiff, even the hipjoint, she took one step and then another.

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. "We can do it. It'll be slow; ! may have to stop a lot." Sweat ran down her forehead, and the furnace wasn't even on yet. "Some sticks for crutches would be good, but here there's nothing big enough." Now she felt feverish; maybe there wasn't much time to spare.

She asked Stonzai to fetch her clothes, and to fill two plastic bags with stream water. Then she said, "We'd better start."

The trip back was longer than she'd realized. She had to pause often, and sometimes the pain wouldn't let her keep silent. The day's heat built; usually they were home by this time. But some of her own heat, she knew, was fever.

Things she saw wouldn't hold still, and once in a while she forgot where she was and who Stonzai was. She wanted a drink of water, but had a vague idea there was some reason she couldn't have one. The one thing she never forgot was to keep that leg straight.

Finally she saw the "fort" ahead, and for a moment everything came clear to her. Rissa, eyes wide, ran toward them. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Hot, reddish blackness was closing in, but now it was all right if it did. Except that first she had to *tell*. "We found some real water, a little river. And something bit me-like the big thing in the swamp, only a little one. And Stonzai sucked the poison out, and-and I *did* walk."

There was more to say, but the blackness wouldn't wait. As the leg crumpled under her,



the last she felt was its stab of pain.

Something felt good; after a while she knew it was the wet cloth that lay over her head, leaving only nose and mouth exposed. When she figured that out, she reached and pushed it back, so she could see.

Rissa sat watching her. "Are you feeling better now? The fever is gone, and most of the swelling from your leg."

Her thigh wore a bandage, but through it Lisele felt no

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rigid, painful lump. She tried moving the leg; it was plenty sore, but nothing worse. "I feel pretty good, I guess."

Across from Rissa, Tregare said, "The fever and swelling, all of it-some kind of venom reaction, strictly chemical. Lucky thing Stonzai could get most of it out. The rest, your system just took a while to clear up." He leaned and touched her forehead. "Princess, you had us scared. Welcome back."

Then he kissed her, and so did Rissa, and Lisele told them everything that had happened, in case she'd missed something before. Tregare said, "There has to be a safe way to bathe in that good water. Tomorrow I'll go check it." And with the look that meant he was enjoying figuring something out, he talked about making some kind of hand-pumps, and screens, and maybe filters, too....

Lisele smelled dinner cooking. When Rissa brought a plateful, she was hungry, all right. Well, it was her first meal of the day. And then she was sleepy again.

For a few days the leg bothered her some, but she got around well enough. And now the furnace wasn't turning on so early. Shaarbant, Tregare said, had definitely passed perihelion and was moving farther from its sun. Every day, and faster than Lisele expected, the time grew that they could stay outside and be active. "Well," said Tregare, "I think we're all acclimated better, now. This time, when we get moving again, we should do better."

They'd been a long time inactive, though, so he set everybody practicing with the travois again. Lisele found the work easier than she remembered. When she told Rissa, her mother said, "After all, you *are* growing, you know." The haul to Tregare's "bathtub" at the stream, and back, was just about right for a practice stint.

With a sharpened stick for a spear, Hagen Trent caught one of the leeches. But even after boiling in several waters, it stank, and had to be thrown away.

When the heat ebbed enough that they could work outside past noon, the group in council decided to move on. Choosing what to take or leave, and then repacking, took another day.

Next morning they ate by handlamps, and left at true dawn.

A week they traveled, a little longer every day, before they ran out of solid ground. A kilo ahead, maybe, they saw a wooded rise, but in between was pure total swamp. Tregare

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turned and hiked back up the last hill, and this time climbed a tree himself. He came back shaking his head. "If there's any kind of route to either side, it's a long way around."

Jenise Rorvik pointed down at the scummy water. "You want to go through *that!*"

Tregare shrugged. "No more than you do. But we have to." Before she could answer, he added, "There'll be more like this. We might as well start learning how to handle it."

Lisele poked a long stick into the water; even at the edge it was over her head. She could swim some, sure-but a *kilo!* Then Tregare began opening a pack, and talking; she listened.

"We inflate these flotation rigs, they'll carry the travois with buoyancy to spare. We'll hang on, using safety lines, and propel them as best we can. I don't know how high things will ride; we can't guarantee to keep it all dry. So we better look at our loads and see what needs waterproofing." He squinted up toward the sun. "Lucky we've got more than half the afternoon to do that."

Lisele had a question, but Hagen Trent beat her to it. "How about the leeches-like



the one that got Lisele, or even a big one?"

Rissa smiled. "We shall all smell very badly, but I do not think any life form will consider us edible." She looked from pack to pack, rummaging, and brought out a spray container. "This repellent was developed on Earth. I understand that among other things it is effective against sharks, Alaskan mosquitoes, piranha and the tsetse fly."

There wasn't enough brush at hand to make a decent stockade, so at nightfall Tregare set one-hour watches. "Me, Trent, Rissa, Jenise, Stonzai, Sevshen, then repeat." Lisele scowled-Tregare should know she was big enough to stay awake when she had to, and he did know she wasn't afraid to use a gun-but he didn't notice, so she picked a place and lay down to sleep.

Near to dawn, Rissa woke her. Everyone ate last night's leftovers, cold. Rissa and Trent rigged flotation units to the travois and Tregare inflated them. Then Rissa had everybody strip, and spread the clothes on the ground, and she sprayed them. "As advertised," Tregare said while he dressed, "we don't stink pretty, at all." Fumes from her blouse stung Lisele's eyes, and she saw why Rissa wanted the clothes off when she sprayed them.

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Then they got into the water, gear and all, and began the longest day Lisele had ever lived. Behind a travois she kicked, swimming style, until her legs ached-and then, because she had to, kept doing it. Breathing so near the surface, the swamp stench knotted her stomach. She kept her breakfast down, though, because she was pretty sure she was going to need it.

They must have been moving nearly an hour before there was any sign that other life shared the water with them. Then something moved, ahead, and made the surface swirl. Tregare signaled for everyone to hang quiet, and they waited. The thing, whatever it was, came to within about five meters-still under water, only a shadow there, but a big one-then turned, throwing a wave of water, and went away. Tregare whistled. "Your stuff works, Rissa!"

After that, once in a while they'd see some disturbance in the water, but nothing came very close and they just kept moving.

Lisele began to wish they wouldn't be quite so brave; to keep going at all, she had to hold her mind on the time when she could rest. The least-loaded travois was buoyant enough to let a person lie on it. One out of seven, and by Tregare's schedule, soon it would be Lisele's turn.

When that turn came, she opened her mind to relaxation. She wasn't certain whether she slept, but when Jenise nudged her to slip back into the water, for a while her legs were strong again.

More than Tregare's guess of a kilo, the distance had to be. But by sun's noon the land ahead was nearer than that behind, so Lisele could rid herself of the notion that this hell would never end. Especially when they paused to sip broth and water from plastic bags.

Past mid-afternoon she wasn't so sure. The water went shallow-still too deep for her to find footing on the muddy bottom, but shallow enough that water plants entangled her feet and made her leg movements futile. Tregare, Hagen, and of course the two Shrakken, were tall enough to stand up and push. Tregare told the others-except Jenise, who was having her turn at rest--just to hang on and let their legs dangle. Eyes closed, Lisele hung limp.

When her trailing feet dragged bottom, she looked to see Tregare in water not much above his knees. Now she stood up. Everybody else was bending over, pushing a travois. So she did, too.

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Even more shallow, the water got, and the less of it to balance against, the easier it was to slip and fall, and get smeared with sticky, itchy mud. When the water deepened again, they paused and tried to scrub that mud off each other. But without much luck, and Tregare said, "Hell with it; let's go. We don't want to be caught out here when it gets dark." So, back to the swim-kicking. Lisele was getting hungry; dawn was a long time ago, with no food but broth. Rissa had figured a way to eat, even in the middle of wet swamp. But then she'd shaken her head. "No. We cannot risk exposing anything that smells edible." They could sip from the bags, only.

Lisele knew the afternoon couldn't really be longer than the morning, but it



sure felt like it. She quit paying attention to anything; she put her head on her arms that held onto the travels, and she knew her legs still kicked because she could hear the splashes.

When her feet began hitting bottom, and Tregare yelled, "We're here! We made it!" at first she thought she was dreaming.

On the shore, away from the mud, she sat with head down and arms hanging. Tregare and others deflated the buoyancy units and dragged the travois up to safety. She knew she should help, but couldn't make herself move, or even keep her eyes open. When she smelled food cooking, at first she didn't care. Until Rissa came with two trays, and sat beside her. "Lisele! You did well today. I would have come to you sooner, but you were resting, and there was so much to do. Here; eat." And once she'd forced the first bites down, Lisele found she did have an appetite, after all.

Halfway done with her tray, she began to feel she could do things again. She looked over to Rissa. "How hard was it, for you? Today, I mean."

Her mother gave her a quick, one-armed hug. "Damned peacercwisting hard, your father would say. And I am sorry I found no time to see to your own well-being, during that ordeal. But-"

Swallowing a lump of meat that could have used more chewing, Lisele said, "You had your own job to do." She thought back, to things Tregare had said. "If I can't pull my weight, what good am I?"

Arms squeezed her, hard. Rissa's cheek touched hers, and she knew the tears she felt were not her own. "*Much* good, my

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dear. To pull weight, as you say, takes time. We must give you the chance to learn how."

Then through growing dark they walked over to where the rest of the group sat, well back from the cooking fire that lit the area. "Watch-schedules again tonight, I'm afraid," Tregare said. "Start from where we left off last night, and same rotation. All right?"

"No." Lisele hadn't known she was going to speak. "How about me?"

Looking not quite angry, Tregare said, "What you mean, princess?"

She took a moment, to think. "You say people should pull their weight; I want to pull mine. You know I can shoot." She paused. "First watch; okay?"

His look puzzled her; then he smiled. "Good enough. Here's my gun; you start on the hour." He looked around. "Everybody else goes in the same order as before."

The energy gun was heavy; in practicing, she was more used to the lighter needle weapons. But when everybody else lay down-sleeping, or maybe not-she checked her handlamp and pointed her gun here and there at the edges of vision, and decided she could handle it.

Staying awake was easy; she was tired, not sleepy. When Stonzai relieved her she was still alert; lying down, she had to use the alpha techniques before she could relax enough to sleep.

In the morning, after eating, Rissa scratched her head. "I cannot abide the itching of this residual mud. I had not thought to bare my scalp again-but, Tregare, if that trimmer is handy-?"

He looked into packs and found the thing, and cut Rissa's hair to stubble that-against a good scrubbing-wouldn't hold mud at all. Then the rest of the humans took the same treatment. Lisele thought the Shrakken, lacking the problem, might be amused-but as usual, their faces showed no reaction. She herself didn't care about "looking funny"; her hair had been flopping into her eyes, and she'd have had to do something about it soon, anyway.

With Jenise Rorvik bald on top but still shaggy around the edges, the trimmer threw sparks and quit working. Tregare looked disgusted. "Water got into it, maybe." He finished the job by scraping with a sharp knife, and the same for Hagen Trent. Now and then he drew blood. "Looks like a cat clawed

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you; sorry." But Jenise didn't fuss as Lisele expected, and Trent only shrugged.

Then they moved out; with a cloth over Lisele's head, the sun wasn't too bad.



For a time they found mostly dry land-with only a few wet stretches, shorter than the first they'd swum, that they couldn't detour around. And as Shaarbant receded from its sun, slowly the days cooled. Soon they could travel all day, and Tregare judged they were making pretty good time. His sightings on the angle of the synchronous moon, though, didn't show much change yet.

Her legs, Lisele thought, were getting stronger. Now she handled the lighter travois as well as Jenise did-or nearly.

They came to a range of hills. At first Lisele thought they'd reached the edge of the mountains, but Tregare pointed out that on these, trees went all the way to the summits. "Still a long haul, I'm afraid." And when they topped the crest and could see the real mountains in the distance, she knew he was right.

Then down into low country, and more swamp. They were used to it now, but one day came to a vast area that made Tregare shake his head when asked to guess its extent. The only sure thing was, on the far side they could see dry-land trees. "That's no one-day crossing," he said. "Two, if we're lucky."

He cut and trimmed straight sticks, nearly two dozen of them, thick as his thumb and nearly his height, and lashed them to the lightest travois. Rissa cooked up a thick soup, the meat shredded finely and the vegetable matter pureed, so it could be swallowed directly from a plastic bag, exposing no attractive odors to whatever lived in the water ahead. She filled six bags.

Next morning, clothes sprayed with the repellent, they set out. Swamp crossings, though not pleasant, were old stuff now; the only new things were eating en route and the prospect of being in the water overnight. At the "lunch" pause, the group emptied the first bag; Lisele found the cold soup most welcome.

A little before dusk, they stopped. "At least," said Rissa, "the land ahead is nearer than that behind." She passed "dinner" around until the second bag was empty. Then everybody helped line up the three travois, and Tregare got his sticks loose, and he and Rissa lashed them across to form one framework, the three units parallel and about four decimeters apart.

"Not the last word in comfort," Tregare said, "but let's see

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how many people can lie up out of the water while the rest sleep wet, hanging from their harnesses. Then we'll set the shifts."

The thing held two without sinking too deeply into the water. Tregare didn't want to try for three, but Hagen Trent got a stubborn look on his face. "It floated you and Stonzai, Tregare. Rissa and Jenise and Lisele, all together, don't weigh much more. And that would make three shifts, instead of three-and-a-half."

Tregare looked to Rissa; the half-set sun glared red on her face as she nodded, and he said, "You're right, Hagen. Let's try it."

It worked-so every ninety minutes, all night, some people climbed out of the water while others went back into it, for three hours of resting in harness. When morning came, Lisele decided she'd had more sleep than she expected. She was still tired, though.

After breakfast Tregare began to unlash the framework, but Jenise said, "What for? The way it is, we can all push on it together, and won't have to go with the slowest team." She grimaced. "Which is usually the one *I'm* on."

In careful tones, Hagen Trent said, "Pointed straight ahead, the water drag won't be any different, together or apart."

Tregare's frown smoothed out. "Hell, yes; why didn't I think of that?" He looked, and said, "In that case, the travois need straightening up. The middle one has a cross-slant to it."

Not long after, they were moving again. At noon, stopping to pass the lunch bag around, they could see land not too far away. And before mid-afternoon they slipped and slogged through mud-separating the travois now-and reached dry ground.

Scrubbing herself in a slimy pool, Lisele was glad they'd taken care of the hair problem recently. Much more of this kind of country, though, and it might be nearly time to do it again.

But after a few more days, with no swamp crossing of more than half a day, the land began to rise. They found a fair-sized river and followed its course upward; largely it ran placid, but sometimes they detoured above canyons that rang with the sound of rapids.

There had been no tonguwalkers past the first range of hills. The first nights along the river, they heard shrill howlings, and in the mornings found disturbingly large footprints



where the dirt lay soft. Then for a time, no signs of animal life, and Tregare had discontinued watch-schedules. Now, though, came

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chitterings in daylight, and occasionally some small grey-brown thing would streak across their path. Lisele was the first to kill one.

The shrill, timid-sounding calls woke her early, still in near-dark. Squinting against dim light she saw the small, pudgy shape. Her instinct was to *like* the little creature-but they were running awfully short of meat. She aimed and sighted, best she could in the dimness, and fired. Squealing, the animal pitched backward; it kicked once and lay still. As she walked over to see what she'd shot, other people sat up. "What was that?" "What happened?"

Then Tregare's voice. "Who fired? Speak up!" He was crouching, Lisele saw, and his energy gun scanned the area.

"It's all right," she said. "I-I shot a little animal that might be good to eat. That's all."

Seeing her kill up close, she felt sorry for it. But it dressed out at two kilos, and was good eating-safe, even, *without* boiling.

Lisele didn't shoot any more of the fuzzy little beasts; Tregare knew how to set snares and Hagen Trent learned fast. Meat went off the short-rations list. Some of the other animals around had to be predators, in the nature of things, but those stayed out of range, seen only as small quick blurs, and never bothered anybody. After a time, even Tregare relaxed and decided that maybe, for a change, they were in safe country. Except for some scratchy plants that raised blisters on bare legs, he seemed to be right.

Farther along, when the small animals became scarce, Jenise got Trent to help her make nets out of monofilament line. She said she'd seen things swimming in the river, and she was right. The first five-kilo catch looked like a small, furry whale- and with only one boiling the meat was edible. Tasty, too.

Once a ship passed overhead, not very high. Out of sunrise came the rumbling thunder; then the ionized drive wake blazed across the sky. Tregare turned to face the others. "*We don't know who it is. Keep thinking that way.*" Lisele tried to do what he said, and everybody else must have, too, because the ship passed and nobody felt any hurt. So maybe the Tsa hadn't noticed them.

The ground leveled off into plains; the jungle thinned. Often they came to large clearings that lacked even bushes, with only knee-high ground cover. The stuff looked like grass at first, until

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you noticed its branching structure. Lisele became used to the sound of it, swishing against her legs.

Nothing bloomed; she'd seen no flowers on this world, and outside the swamp, no equivalent of flying insects. One kind of airborne creature first appeared when they reached the plains and soon showed up in greater numbers. Smallish, it was, and its flight swooped like that of bats or swallows. Tregare wanted to see one at close range, but the erratic movements were too much for anybody's marksmanship. Then one day they came upon a crippled one, dragging a wing as it tried to nobble away through the tall "grass." Hagen Trent took his shirt off, and caught the thing in it.

It didn't look appetizing, and it smelled awful. From its bare skin, Rissa guessed it might be something like a reptile, but Trent shook his head. "From the body heat and pulse rate-I can feel both through the cloth-it's obviously warm-blooded."

The toothed, beaklike snout opened wide as it hissed, then snapped shut in a try for Trent's hand. The eyes, facing neither forward nor to the sides but about halfway between, blinked rapidly. Trent hefted its weight. "Not over a kilo, if that." It snapped at him again and nearly connected. He said, "Does anybody want it for anything?" No one spoke; he dropped the shirt and stepped back, and the creature made its hobbling escape.

He picked up the shirt and sniffed at it. "Might be useful, at that-if we ever hit any more swamp, and ran out of repellent."



After one of Tregare's nightly readings on the synchronous moon, he announced they'd reached its meridian. "So we've covered maybe a quarter of our trip. Or-" He shrugged. "-maybe only a fifth. Like I told you, I don't remember, for sure, the reading from Sassden and the *Deux*." Well, Lisele thought, a fifth was better than nothing-and Tregare *had* said it could be more.

A week later, they reached a fork in the river; the two tributaries were about the same size. One branch started off northwest; the other went roughly west-southwest. "That one's ours," said Tregare, "because I make us a little north of Sassden's latitude. We'll keep checking, and hope it doesn't take us too much out of our way."

He got only two more moon sightings, because on the third day the rains began. Not gradually, but afl at once. Under clear

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sky they went to sleep; they woke to thunder, and then the torrent fell.

Getting things together was a miserable scramble. With their fire drowned, they ate breakfast cold. And as soon as possible, sloshing through the downpour, they got under way.

One good thing, Lisele thought, feet slipping on the wet ground, was that the rain was cool. Not cold-just right to ease the heat of exertion. But that was the only good thing. Well, maybe that this mud wasn't sticky like swamp mud, but only slippery.

They took lunch cold, too, but toward dusk they came to a stand of bushes. Tregare and Trent cut brush up with bolos and only used the energy gun to light the fire. Hot food felt good-but even sitting painfully close to the fire, their wet clothes were only heated, never dried. After a time, Rissa said, "Bran-there is plastic sheeting, such as you used to line the bathtub at the fort. And we still have the poles that helped us sleep through the night in the swamp. So-"

"A tent?" said Tregare. "Okay, sure; we can have a go at it."

The first two designs didn't work very well, but the third try made a shelter that stayed up and covered all of them. Water still leaked in under the edges, but they and the ground were already wet, so what did *that* matter?

"Tomorrow," Tregare said, "we'll scrounge up something for a floor, too." But with the dark coming so quickly, this night, there hadn't been time to do that much rummaging.

Three more days they slogged along, the rain beating harder all the time. Around noon, the fourth day-though the sun barely made a lighter spot in that drenching sky-they came alongside a fair-sized hill that rose from the river to a thick grove of trees.

Tregare stopped, slipped and almost fell under the weight of the travois. Water ran from his eyebrows down into his eyes; with the back of one hand he brushed it away. Looking uphill, he said, "I vote a stopover-camp and dry out. Anybody else in favor?"

Several-Lisele was one-mumbled, "Yes." Jenise Rorvik, looking too tired to do anything more, nodded.

"Motion carried." Tregare turned to plod up the hill-not directly, but slanting around its side. The others followed.

About halfway up, Lisele looked toward the summit and

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saw the little cliff, and the cave. "Tregare!" She pointed; he looked, also.

"Now that's luck!" For the first time in days she heard him laugh. "I doubt it's big enough, as is, but we can do some digging. And maybe build out some, in front of the hole. Lisele, I think you've saved us one big lot of work!"

Leaving his travois, he scrambled up; she followed, until they stood at the foot of a minor talus of clods and gravel, looking into the cave's mouth. A roughly-squared oval, over two meters tall, with the bottom perhaps a meter above where they stood. As far as she could see inside, the passage continued. Five meters, anyway, and maybe more. Looking around to her, Tregare said, "Not too much building, we'd have to do." He gestured at the loose rubble. "Clear this away, cut steps in the solid dirt. Wouldn't have to be wide, especially."

His gaze was on her but she sensed he was looking beyond. "Lots of edible plants around. Small animal tracks leading in and out of this hole, but nothing big. We could live here for a time." He faced downhill. "We *can* keep moving in this slop-but in terms of wear and tear on all of us, I'm not sure it's worthwhile." He



shrugged. "After a dry night's sleep, we can talk about it."

Twenty days later the rain still poured and the group showed no intention of leaving. Instead, one project at a time, they worked to make the place more comfortable. The loose talus was cleared, and the dirt-cut steps floored with wood slabs. Two thin tree trunks—one found fallen, the other cut down and trimmed—leaned against the cliff at either side of the cave. The slanting roof built across them, not quite leakproof but close to it, was made of heavily-leaved branches. Above the raised fire-pit, scraped together from talus debris, a hole let smoke escape; most of the heat, though, was deflected into the cave. At the front, the roof ended well above ground level, at moderate stooping height for Tregare; it shielded a drier-than-not area about five meters wide and three deep. All in all, Lisele thought, a comfortable arrangement.

Inside, the cave went back nearly eight meters at a slight leftward curve, then narrowed fast, and at the same time shallowed and dropped away toward the vertical. A projection of rock blocked further exploration; lying against it, from far below Lisele could hear faint sounds of rushing water. Stonzai tried letting down a plastic bucket, but after a few meters it caught on

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an unseen obstacle and the line went slack. So they had to bring water from the river, perhaps a hundred meters down the hill. That was all right; Jenise and Hagen went there to ply their nets, anyway.

Now, Jenise was nearer her old self than any time since the scout had crashed. The wetness inflamed the skin of her wrist, so Trent took the cast off. The damaged bones, they found, had knit into an apparently solid mass—with the fingers half-curved, only slight flexure to them; the left hand was a rigid club. But now the thumb could grip against those fingers, and she could exert pressure with the hand as a whole. Freer of pain, and rested, Jenise became more lively and talkative—no longer sitting gaunt-faced and silent, in seeming reproach to the others' efforts to raise their spirits. And one evening—and then another, and afterward quite often—she and Hagen went in the cave while the rest sat outside, and Lisele heard sounds much like those Rissa made with Tregare.

Was the rain still getting heavier? Tregare thought so; others disagreed. Rissa noted a cyclic pattern, slacking off at night for a time and pouring harder in the mornings. Since outdoors was wet *all* the time, Lisele didn't see what difference the details made.

She was slogging back from the latrine to the cave. The facility itself was roofed, but not the twenty meters of path leading to it. The thing was set downhill from the cave and a little to the right—downriver, to avoid polluting their water supply.

Reaching the lean-to, Lisele turned before the fire until she was fairly dry, before putting her clothes back on. Being naked in the rain was chilly now, but skin dried faster than clothes did.

Near one of the lean-to's outer corners, a plastic vat sat open. As Rissa came out of the cave, Lisele wrinkled her nose at the vat's stench. "I know it'll help, if you can tan the skins from those little whales, but it doesn't smell like this batch is working."

Rissa shrugged. "I hoped this type of bark contained enough tannin, but apparently not. Next I will try the outer layers from the roots Sevshen gathered." She covered the vat. "When someone is here to help, I will take this past the latrine and dump it."

Rissa wasn't hinting; they both knew Lisele could barely lift one end of the thing, let alone help carry it. The girl said, "Where is everybody?"

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"The Shrakken are with Tregare, gathering firewood. Hagen and Jenise went to the river to check their nets."

"How's the vegetable supply? Should I go look for more?"

"Not today. I have put the present store to cooking, before it molds, and that will last us two or three days."

"Then I guess I'll go inside for a while. Unless there's something else I could do." Smiling, Rissa shook her head, so Lisele climbed the steps and went to sit on her pallet. She might as well practice alpha meditation; it would help pass this boring time.



A time came when everyone agreed the rain was really easing off. Rissa, using the roots she had mentioned, did produce usable leather. It smelled awful, but didn't rot or crumble. With plastic thread, Lisele sewed herself a pair of moccasins and then measured everyone's feet and made each person a gift pair. The humans, that was-the toe-walking Shrakken didn't use footwear.

Almost as abruptly as it had begun, the rain stopped; one night, Lisele woke to silence. Next day's rain was light and intermittent; the group began sorting stores, and packing. On the following day, they saw the sun.

At dinner, Hagen Trent said, "Do we start off tomorrow, if we're ready by then, or give the footing more chance to dry?"

Brows raised, Tregare looked around the circle. Rissa said, "Not tomorrow, I would think. For two days, perhaps three, let us observe how quickly the ground dries. When the improvement looks good to us, is time enough to go."

Rorvik nodded, her short blonde hair flopping with the motion. "If we try to move too soon, I think we'd lose more in the long run. That slippery-sliding on mud takes it out of you, fast."

Tregare nodded. "I think you're both right. So that's how we'll do it." And on the fourth morning, they set out.

Descending the hill, rounding its flank to go upriver, Lisele stopped and looked back at the lean-to, hiding the cave's entrance. From the morning's fire, smoke still rose. She sighed.

Pausing beside her, Tregare said, "Something the matter?"

"Not really. But we lived there-how long? And, you know-except for being so *wet* all the time, it wasn't such a bad place."

He laughed. "With the right people, and a little work to make things comfortable, no place is. Let's go."

XVIII. Ivan

Nobody liked Ivan's announcement much, when he made it. The idea that on Shaarbant years were passing while the *Deux* spent mere weeks in space-by its own clocks-dampened spirits. But as Ivan said, "You can't argue with Einstein. Nobody can, except maybe Pennet Hoyfarul, and he's not here." He heard Crowfoot's laugh, and a snicker that sounded like Melaine Holmbach, so maybe he'd broken the tension a little. He said, then, "Everybody's doing the best they can. That's good enough for me." Clinking sounds indicated that Dacia was breaking out drinks for the group; a cold glass came against his knuckles and he picked it up and sipped from it. Bourbon, a little ice. "Thanks, Dacia."

"Welcome."

He sipped again. Talk buzzed around him: nothing important, so he quit listening and retreated mostly into his own mind. Where the worries ahead awaited him-but he couldn't afford to wrangle with them, not yet. And the worries behind, the past ones, were over and done. ("Unless you have a time machine in your back pocket, Rissa...") Suddenly he laughed, bringing the discussion to momentary halt, until he said, "A chance thought; don't heed me."

But the mood was broken; the group began to disperse. Ivan heard the leave-takings and departing footsteps; when he figured that only Dacia remained with him in their quarters, he spoke her name. She said, "Yes, Ivan. They're gone now."

"Then-" *Is there time for us?* he wanted to ask, because somehow lately there hadn't been much.

"Ivan," she began. But then the alarms rang, the extension from Control, and they had to hurry upship.

By now he didn't need a great deal of guidance, but to make speed it did help.

Anders had the watch; Ivan knew that, and on entering Control was greeted by Kobolak's voice. "It's a ship, Captain. Passing at an angle, not in the same plane with us. No possibility of intercept, either way." Skew meeting, yes.

Ignoring the question of which side of ninety degrees the courses converged--



because it didn't matter-Ivan said, "Whose?" No answer. Irritated, he raised his voice. "Damn all, Anders! Out here, that ship can't be human. Is it Shrakken or is it Tsa?"

Low-voiced, Kobolak answered. "I-I can't be sure. I never got a good look at either."

Ivan bit back his response. Hell, the man was right! He said, "Estimate closest approach?"

"Yes. One moment." And shortly the First Hat read off numbers that brought relief to Ivan Marchant. Whoever might be on that passing ship, it couldn't come close enough to affect the minds aboard *Inconnu Deux*.

No point in hiding his relieved sigh, so he didn't. "Thanks, First Hat. This time, whoever's out there, we're safe enough."

He turned toward the soft sound of Dacia's breathing, then thought of something else and put his blind gaze to Kobolak's position. "That ship's course. Any clues where it came from, where it's going?"

Sounding calm now, Anders said, "Nothing connected to human space. The course is nearly right-angled to the way we came out here."

Ivan shrugged. "Then I guess we can forget it." Well, it made sense. Nothing said that everything in space had to relate to *Inconnu Deux*. And some things wouldn't. "Thanks."

Again he turned to Dacia. "All that bourbon calls for a little coffee. Join me?" She came and grasped his arm, and they went down to the galley, where she left him at their usual table and brought the coffee plus a few light rolls. Relaxing, Ivan nibbled the yeasty biscuits, now and then dunking the edge of one into hot coffee. Lacking sight, he was learning to make the most of other senses. *Might as well*, he thought.

He still had on his mind the same idea as before the alarm had rung. So when he declined Dacia's offer of a second refill on coffee, Ivan said, "Your next watch is some hours away? You suppose we might have time for *us*?"

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Her indrawn breath sounded a bit shocked. "Ivan! Can't we discuss these things in more privacy?"

"I didn't hear anyone sitting around close." And he hadn't,

"That's not the point. I-"

"You're right," said Ivan. "Let's go downship."

Descending, holding Dacia's arm for quick guidance, Ivan wondered whether maybe he had his head on backwards. Because the problem with sex, lately, had very little to do with Dacia; it was that he, Ivan, was so wound up with worries and couldn't seem to unload them. They would go to bed, the two of them, and begin all the nice playing around, and then when it came to cases he'd find that his mind had betrayed him. His thoughts would be back to Shaarbant and his body might as well be there, too, for all the good it was doing him-not to mention Dacia's feelings.

But for better or worse, this ship's day had brought a diversion, and bourbon wasn't all that bad an idea, and Shaarbant could *wait*.

So when they entered captain's digs he held onto Dacia's arm and said, "Can we skip all the niceties? Just make love? Please?"

Her voice trembled, a little but not much. "I guess so, Ivan."

"Good." And the clothes came off, seams ripping a little with the force of Dacia's help. *Peace take me, it's all working!*

And for both of them, apparently. Ivan hadn't known that Dacia could talk and bite at the same time, but she certainly could.

Ivan had never understood that *triste* stuff; sex didn't sadden him, it energized him. He'd have liked to nap with Dacia for a time but felt too restless; after a parting kiss he dressed and went up to Control. He arrived just in time to hear Ellalee relieving Alina at the comm-panel, so by the roster in his mind he knew that Crowfoot would be taking over from Anders Kobolak. Ivan spoke a general hello, heard the four answers and then the departures of Anders and Alina.

He found his way to the backup pilot's position, sat, and turned to face Ellalee. "How's the pilot training coming along?" He knew she'd begun the learning program, using Crowfoot's simulations, but he hadn't checked on it recently.

"I'm none too certain," and something in the voice made

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him visualize her shrug. "To start me off easy, Jeremy rigged sims in the scout, too, I suppose you know." He hadn't. "So when he decided I had those simpler controls down bonzer, he moved me up to trying the ship itself. Those programs, you'll recall, are rigged to where you're sitting now. But as to how I'm doing at it, Jeremy hasn't truly said yet."

Ivan turned toward Crowfoot. "Any problems, Jere?"

"None at all," and in the answer Ivan detected no hesitation. "Sorry if I haven't given enough feedback, Ellalee. You learn well, make few mistakes and are gaining in proficiency. All you need now, I'd say, is to keep practicing."

"And I surely will."

"What's she best at, now?" Ivan asked. "And what not?"

After a pause, Crowfoot said, "Good fast reactions, good judgment in choosing and executing maneuvers. That's the strong part."

"And the weak?"

"Just what you might expect, I suppose. The things a trainee can't really master without some experience in actual ship handling, to get the feel of a vessel." For a moment, Ivan thought he'd have to ask again, to get a solid answer. But then Crowfoot said, "Well, simulated landings, of course."

With a brief laugh, Ivan relaxed. "Then that's all right. Nobody would expect a green hand to do a landing without actual flight training-and whatever else happens, a landing while we're under Tsa attack won't be one of them. And Ellalee's ability to resist the Tsa is *why* she's training."

The woman's chuckle indicated release of tension. "Since it's not been tested all that much, let's hope we don't need it."

Confiding in no one else, Ivan considered Dacia's reports of the dwindling food inventory. With only a rough guess as to the ship's clock-time remaining before they could reach Shaarbant, he tended to think conservatively. Eventually, after one confab with Dacia, he called assembly and put the question.

"For obvious reasons, we need a food reserve. At our current rate of chow down, with eight of us eating, we won't have that reserve."

Melaine Holmbach's voice. "You want some of us back in freeze?"

He shook his head. "Not really. We're few enough now, for company, and our human need of it."

"Then what?" Ranee Peleter: not sounding belligerent, just asking.

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"A choice," said Ivan. "Majority rules. Either two go into freeze, or we cut rations by twenty-five percent. You choose which we do."

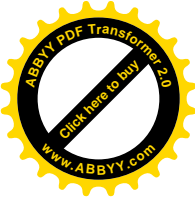
"That's fair," said Jeremy Crowfoot. "For freeze, though- who do you have in mind? Or have you made that decision?"

He had. Crowfoot himself, for one. And the other-Anders wouldn't like it, but Alina was next most expendable to the ship's operation. But, grinning, Ivan shook his head. "You're asking me to influence the vote. I won't do that,"

So he got the result he wanted: eight-to-zero, the group voted for the short-rations option.

One more passing ship, they spotted-on Crowfoot's watch, this one, and much too far away for identification. Its course, nearly parallel to the *Deux's* but diverging slightly, gave no clue to origin or destination. The two ships' velocities were so nearly matched that the vague, flickering dot hung on the main screen for more than half a day, drifting too slowly for the motion to be seen. Consensus was that due to the relative course angles, the other probably hadn't spotted the *Deux* at all. "Which suits me just fine," said Ivan Marchant.

Then, once again, space around the ship was empty except for stars, none of them near enough to show a disk. How far, still, to Shaarbant? Ivan wished he knew.



XIX. Lisele

For a long time the country stayed pretty much the same. By the time the heat got bad again, they were nearing the mountain range-or its foothills, anyway. The river branched once more, and then again, until it wasn't much more than a large stream they followed.

The underbrush thinned, and the trees; it became safe to travel for a time after dark and before daylight. As the ground

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rose, they found that while the heat increased as badly as ever in the afternoons, at night the air cooled drastically.

Stonzai was the first to see one of the big reddish-brown animals; by the time the rest looked to her pointing, they saw only a patch of color disappearing behind a ridge. Not long after, though, they saw another, drinking from the stream. It had long, powerful legs and a heavy tail; its head, except for the large, upright ears, reminded Lisele of a bear's. As it left the stream, it picked up something in its mouth and carried it away.

"A dead animal, it had," said Tregare. "Carnivore, is it, or scavenger?" But the next beast they saw was grazing, and he shrugged. "Sooner or later, I guess we'll find out." Two days later, Stonzai surprised one of the creatures; after pausing and making a trumpeting noise, it charged her. So she shot it. Stomach contents were a mix of animal and vegetable matter. "Omnivore," was the verdict.

At any rate the meat was edible without boiling, though a little strong to the taste. But as Rissa reminded the others, "Because we eat these native plants and animals without apparent harm, it does *not* mean that we may not be accumulating trace poisons, over a period of time."

Tregare made a mock frown. "You trying to spoil my appetite? You don't have to; there's plenty of dinner to go around."

The heat grew to fill more of each day, shortening travel. When they were barely into the mountains, far short of the higher parts and now forced to stop moving before noon, Tregare called halt.

"We won't make it over the top, not on this run. So we'd better look for a place to set camp." He waved toward the stream, here less than two meters wide, though still better than knee-deep. "We go much higher, pass another fork or two, maybe we're stuck with a trickle that dries up altogether when the heat does its worst." He looked around. "Comments?"

"A stop place find we, yes," said Stonzai, and asked if Tregare meant right now, this very day.

"Soon as we can, I'd say. Judging from last year, once the heat turns up this far, it gets unbearable in a real hurry."

"But the water," said Rissa, "must govern. Bran-suppose we continue a day or two-until we find a good site, or the stream branches, or becomes too small for us to depend upon."

"And if we don't find a good place?" said Hagen Trent.

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Jenise pointed downstream. "Yesterday, we passed one that might work." She turned to Bran Tregare. "Where the pond was, under a clay bank with overhang? We could claw out a fair-sized cave there."

Lisele saw he was thinking about it. "Let's don't backtrack if we can help it. We can keep that spot in mind, though."

But next day before mid-morning, the question was settled. Beside a flat expanse of hard-packed soil the stream branched, and the smaller part dropped from a narrow-gated box canyon with steep walls and a surprising thick growth of trees. At its upper end the water came down in a fall that dissipated almost totally into spray. The slope below it held a lush growth of grey-green vegetation, and from that delta of damp ground the water seeped to become again a current that filled its narrow channel.

Standing, hands on hips, just inside the canyon's gate, Tregare looked up at the feathery waterfall and then back toward the stream's junction. "I don't see how we could ask for better." No one disagreed. "Now then-let's figure how to bar off the



neck of this canyon, here. Make it our own exclusive private entrance."

Here, Lisele thought, was the best place they'd had since the scout crashed. Some days of hard work gave them shelter and reasonable security. Tregare designed living huts the easiest way, using four trees for corner posts-except in one case where he used two, and laid cut-off branches over to the adjacent rise of stone, to make that enclosure. At the canyon's bottom the exit gate was framed strongly in wood, and the gaps between that frame and the narrow natural exit filled with steeply piled clay, blasted down from the nearby cliff wall. "Anything that comes over that pile," said Tregare, "has to be bigger than I've seen on this world-and with a pretty good running start."

Vegetation was easy to gather; under the spray of waterfall it grew in lush profusion, and most was edible. Meat was more of a problem; as time passed, the mounting heat made hunting expeditions shorter, until Rissa suggested that the foraging parties take along improvised shelters and wait through until next morning before they came back. Since the large omnivores were the major prey, it took at least three persons to carry a kill home.

The parts not eaten immediately were cut into thin strips and sun dried for storage; the searing heat, and lack of flying insect scavengers, made the process easy.

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As perihelion neared, they worried about the water supply. The stream outside the canyon looked about the same, but the little one that sprayed from above was shrinking enough to notice. "If we have to," said Tregare, "we can haul up water for ourselves. But irrigating our natural-bom garden up there-" He looked, and shook his head.

So far, though, the plants seemed to be doing well enough.

Lisele wasn't sure how Tregare knew just when perihelion came, but one day he announced it. The day after, she woke to find blood on her thighs. She knew what it meant, of course; back on Earth Rissa had explained the whole business, when Arlen Limmer's younger sister Helene had made such a big mystery about her own first period, before the Limmers hosted Helene's menarche party. But Lisele hadn't expected it so soon, for herself; her lower belly wasn't showing much more than fuzz, and whether the flesh around her small nipples was beginning to bulge or not, she couldn't be sure. Sometimes she thought it was; other times she decided it was just wishful thinking.

Finding nothing else close to hand, to wipe herself with, she used a clean sock; she could rinse it later. She went looking for Rissa, and found her in the work hut at her latest project of trying to make some sort of cloth from plant fibers. From her expression, Rissa wasn't having much luck. Jenise and Hagen were there, too, sewing whaleskin reinforcements to the worn plastic straps of a travois. Lisele nodded toward those two and went to Rissa. "I just started menstruating, I think. Do you have any extras, of those things you use to keep it from getting on your clothes?"

For a moment Rissa's eyes widened; then she looked at her personal chronometer and nodded. "Time! I had not thought about it, but in Earth bio-years you are past twelve, nearer thirteen. So I should not be surprised." She looked closely at Lisele. "Is there any discomfort?"

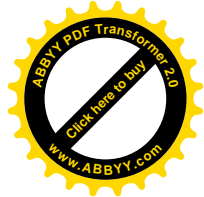
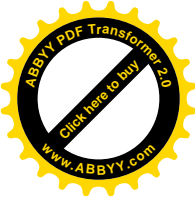
Lisele checked her internal sensations and shook her head. "Just hungry, like always in the mornings." And Rissa laughed.

"Then your development is sound, despite the strains from our environment, and I shall not worry." Her brow wrinkled; then she said, "Yes, we have enough of the reusable inserts to go around, and I believe you have seen how I recycle them." Lisele nodded. "One caution, only; these items are non-expendable; the supply here is limited."

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"Well, sure!" What shocked Lisele was that since the scout had crashed, she hadn't thought much of *anything* was expendable.

"Well, then; let us go and equip you." Rissa stood, and for the first time Lisele realized that she and her mother were so near the same height as made no difference. She followed to the hut her parents shared, and waited while Rissa searched through a pack of miscellany. Pushing some of it aside, she brought out four of the foam plastic devices, and shook her head. "I had not thought, when we planned a brief trip to Shtegel-so there are none of these in the smaller sizes. I hope



you will have no difficulty."

Lisele took one, and sat down. "Maybe I'd better try it now."

It was first awkward and then painful; she knew where to start but not which way to go. She didn't want to ask for help but finally had to. Then for a few seconds it still hurt, but once the thing was in place, the pain stopped. "Thanks. It's all right now, I think." Getting to her feet made her wince one time, but she realized that was soreness from her own try, pushing in the wrong direction. She took a couple of steps forward, then back. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Good." Rissa gave a few more instructions, ending with, "And if you need help again, of any sort, do not hesitate to ask."

"Course not." Hearing herself speak in mimic of Tregare's tones, Lisele had to smile.

When she got back to her own hut, she remembered to wash the sock.

When she saw Tregare a little later, he grinned and said, "Welcome to puberty," so she knew Rissa had told him. Jenise asked how she felt, and she said all right. When she and Trent were up gathering food plants, he seemed awkward with her, and she asked why.

He paused, then shrugged. "I don't know. It's just that you've been a kid all this time, and now you're not."

"But you must've been around a *lot* of kids that grew up."

His brow wrinkled. "Not like this, the few of us living so closely, and no one else. It makes it-embarrassing, somehow."

She patted his shoulder; his flinch surprised her. She stiffened, and finally said, "After all, I'm not going to *molest* you."

"No, that's not-" His face reddened, and then Lisele

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remembered, back at the scout when Rissa had thrown him down into the mud.

She shook her head. "And not the other way around, either. Because we all *know* each other now-and I trust you, Hagen."

He took a deep breath, and nodded, and let her pat his arm. Then in his usual tone of voice he began talking about whether the little stream was still shrinking. And after that one awkward time, they were friends again, all right. No problems.

The upper stream lasted long enough, just barely, to save them a lot of hard work. As the heat ebbed, they began sorting and packing, getting ready to leave the canyon at the right time. Heading into the mountains now, with steeper parts coming up, they'd want half the day fit for travel before it would pay to start out at all.

Two or three days before the start-they hadn't quite decided- Stonzai couldn't get up. The next day, Sevshen couldn't either. Nobody knew what to do; the humans hadn't seen a Shrakken ill before.

The visible symptoms didn't tell much, and Rissa detected no chill or fever-only some shivering and an obvious lack of strength. And Stonzai seemed to have lost all grasp of human language.

Treatment? "Food and water," said Rissa, "and more covering if they seem to need it." So they took turns sitting with the sick aliens, feeding them, offering water more often than they seemed to want it, and tending their other needs. But none of it helped.

Jenise had sickbay watch; the others grouped in the common hut. "Nearly fifty days," Tregare said, "and we still don't know what the trouble is."

"It could be a natural thing," said Hagen Trent, "something that happens at periodic intervals. How can we know?"

Tregare frowned. "Damned odd, that individual cycles would coincide. Disease, though-in all of space I know of only three cases where humans came down with infection from an alien world."

"Now four, perhaps," said Rissa, "though not of humans, this one." She shook her head. "Besides worrying over Stonzai and Sevshen, I cannot forget the *time* this is costing us."

"And effort," Tregare said. "Packing twice as much water from below, so we can water the up-valley garden at night."

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Lisele sat upright. "We can't leave them! They've been so good, and loyal-and now Stonzai can't even *talk* with us."



Tregare waved a hand. "Nobody said anything about deserting our friends. And nobody's going to. Rest easy, princess."

Rissa touched her daughter's arm. "Even if we wished to, we could not. Without Stonzai fully recovered, when we reached a Shrakken outpost there would be no way to communicate."

"But it'll be a load off my mind," said Tregare, "when those two get healthy. Load off our feet, too-all that peacewasting *water*."

And when the Shrakken were up again, for many days they still lacked strength. Able to talk again, Stonzai had no explanation for the illness. "Something, not before happen did," was all she said. And as Tregare put it, there was no way to argue with that.

"The long and short of it is," he said in council, "now we're so close to rainy season, it's not worth moving." There was argument, but he wouldn't budge and Rissa backed him. Twenty-three days later, when the rains struck, the rest admitted he was right. At this height the season wasn't as drastic as down in swamp country-but nobody claimed it was fit to travel in.

Jenise worried that the little canyon might flood. Tregare pointed out some high-water marks and called her worry needless. Neither, it turned out, was wholly right. The highest water covered the dirt floors of two huts. Jenise and Hagen moved into the work hut, against the canyon's west wall, and the common hut was out of business-so when any partying spirit could be aroused, Rissa and Tregare now hosted. The maturing of Trent's leaf-bulb wine sparked one such occasion. Lisele thought the stuff didn't taste too bad, but next day Tregare went around surly, and told Trent, "I've got a name for that booze of yours. 'Old Head-Splitter'."

Hunting became impossible, so it was lucky they'd stored so much dried meat-and at the rain's onset, wrapped and sealed the stores against damp and mold. Hagen and Jenise sometimes braved the rain to net the small whaethings from the swollen lower stream, except during the peak of flood when it simply wasn't safe to do so-but those gleanings were mere tidbits to break the monotony. Still, Lisele appreciated even that much change, and said so.

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Up here the change of seasons was less abrupt. The rain eased off, the streams slackened, but gradually. Lisele found the process interesting-watching the plant life change from day to day, while the ground firmed for better walking.

Getting ready to move again was confusing, because their adjustments for high water had been hurried and unplanned. Now they had to look around to find things, because who remembered where they'd moved this or that, all in a rush when the water rose? But eventually they got everything more or less in order, and when the ground dried enough for decent walking they were ready to go on up farther into the mountains.

While the steep crests still rose high before them, the stream they followed became a trickle. One night, sitting in dark around cooking-fire embers, they talked. "Unless we get high enough to find snow patches, we're seeing just about the last of the water."

"From this view, I see snow only on the peaks. In valleys we cannot see from here-when we flew over, so long ago, I do not recall noticing."

"I didn't see, of course. Well, we have to carry as much water as we can manage. Because aside from snow, what is there?"

"Lakes, maybe. Ponds. But yeah, Jenise-you're still right."

"Food, too. When's the last time anyone brought down some meat?"

"I could've, today. But these up here, they're so *little*."

A hand, touching. "Sure, princess. But while we can still spare water for boiling, we'd better sample some, just in case. So tomorrow, if you get the chance, throw a needle or two."

"Sure. Course I will, Tregare."

"But the main point. We must open all packs, and discard those things so necessary in the low country but not now- perhaps even a travois or two-and proceed with what we *now* need."

Silence, then a gruff laugh. "You called it, Rissa."



Keeping only one travois and six of the unit packs, they continued. The travois carried mostly water, and only Tregare and Hagen and the two Shrakken took turns hauling it. Lisele worried, thinking of things left behind that might be needed-but in this steep country they were carrying all they could manage. Enough? Who knew? Maybe even the few lightweight luxuries would prove to be too much.

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She wished that when she was making moccasins she'd made herself some larger ones; hers were too small now, and her stretch shoes were wearing out, right where her weight came down the hardest.

Far behind, and off their necessary course, lay the last trickle of stream. Now as they climbed steep ravines and crossed jagged ridges, the only water lay in small, stagnant pools. What they found, they used-Tregare had elected- to keep the lightweight purifier-but it was only minor aid.

They shot and ate three of the small animals; then they saw no more.

The heat, when it began, wasn't the burden it had been at lower altitudes. Hot, yes, but bearable far past the point at which they'd been forced to stop, down below. They kept moving.

When they topped the final highest gap and looked down the long rugged slope of ridges that hid the coastal plain, Tregare laughed-high-pitched, in the thin air. "That's it, people. If we can last until we get down to water, we'll make it the rest of the way, all right."

He didn't sound, though, as if it was going to be easy.

The first of the descent was steep, over bare rock and down graveled gullies. Almost at once, as soon as they were a few hundred meters below the crest, Lisele felt the change. The air was cooler, and from the distant ocean came a steady breeze. Of course, as Tregare pointed out, they were farther from the equator now, heading toward where he guessed Sassden to be. But still the coastal slope had a different feel to it than the inland bowl.

They spent one night in the open. They'd seen no animals except something like a spotted, hornless goat, but Tregare set watches anyway. Next day they reached timberline and walked in partial shade, on a sparse blanket of dead foliage that gradually became thicker as they progressed. And now there was water- mere seepage at first, but then true springs that fed tiny streams. Jenise wanted to refill some water bags, but Tregare said to wait until the streams grew. Meanwhile they dipped the fresh cool liquid up in cups, to drink it. It was *so good!*

Once Rissa stopped and pointed, and Lisele caught a glimpse of a medium-sized animal that moved like a carnivore as it vanished into underbrush. Later they saw others like it; each time the beast skulked rapidly away. Even so, they stood watches that night, too.

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The fourth day of descent they came to a lateral valley with a large creek running through it. Longingly, feeling the itch of her skin, Lisele asked, "Do you think it might be safe to swim?"

Tregare stroked his beard. "We weren't around this side of the mountains long enough to learn much. And after that leech that got you, last time you played guinea pig-"

Rissa gestured downstream. "The bend, there. The pool, that an eddy has formed? The sandbar nearly encloses it. Perhaps-"

They walked over, and looked. The pool *was* almost isolated; only a shallow passage joined it to the current, and the meter-deep water was clear as crystal. Hagen Trent said, "Just a minute," and went to timber's edge, then brought back a fair-sized log. From the redness of his face, it was about as heavy as he could manage, but when he plunked it down beside the sandbar, it blocked the passage. "There! And I'll be your guinea pig." He began to undress.

"Wait." From her pack Rissa took a strip of dried meat, then moved to the pool and dropped it in. Nothing happened. After a time she shrugged and picked it up, impaled it on a stick and held it in the current outside the pool. A small fishlike creature nosed at it; then several more came.

"They're nibbling," Tregare said, and Lisele saw one of the little decimeter-long things jerk and tug, and pull away a minuscule shred. Tregare knelt on the sandbar,



motioned for Rissa to bring the meat nearer, and cupped his hand. On the third try he caught one of the tiny swimmers, and held it up for all to see. The mouth opened and closed; Tregare explored it with a finger, and grinned. "Not much bite," he said. "About like a young trout, on Earth."

So the humans undressed. Hagen and Tregare went in first; there was room for both, but not much left over. They ducked their heads under, scrubbed themselves with bare hands and then with sand, and came out laughing. Then, with Rissa and Jenise, Lisele had her turn. The fee! of the cold water was *delicious*; even when her teeth chattered, she stayed until Rissa called a halt, and came out reluctantly.

"Wash us also, will we," said Stonzai. The two Shrakken shed their usual harnesslike garb and entered the pool. Side by side they lay; then, slowly and in unison, they submerged their heads and began to roll over in the water. Each time their faces came uppermost, they raised them for a quick breath. For

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washing they used their hands not at all, but merely let the water lave them as they turned. After what seemed a long time, both sat up, looked at each other and made hissing noises. Then they got out, and walked through the trees and out of sight into the brush. Except for Stonzai's picking up her needle-gun, they were unencumbered.

Well, *there's a new ritual*," said Tregare. "New to us, I mean."

Trent chuckled. "I think they're off on a date."

"Do we have to hold lunch for them?" asked Jenise. She was smiling, and it struck Lisele how different the woman was, from the whining cripple who had left the scout with them. Without paying close attention, it was hard to notice any difficulties with the maimed hand. Now she gestured with it. "I'm really hungry!"

"Since we're cold-snacking," Tregare said, "I wouldn't think we need to wait. I hope they don't stay out too long, is all. On account of it'd be nice to make a lot more distance today."

Before the two returned, he was fretting, but Lisele used the time for another dip in the pool. When the aliens had eaten, the group donned packs and waded the creek at a shallow run of rapids. By nightfall they were well into the next, lower range of foothills.

In the next few days, before the coastal plain came fully into view, they surmounted two more such ranges. They reached the crest of the last one shortly before sunset, and decided to camp there. While dinner cooked, Lisele noticed a steep knoll, the nearest high ground, topped by a tall straight tree. Nudging Tregare, she pointed. "From up there I could get a good scan. Anything special you'd like me to look for?"

For a moment he looked startled; then he nodded. In the soft bare dirt he drew lines. "Two rivers that come together about like this; Sassden's at the junction. We'd see it, here, from about *this* angle, I think." She watched his gesture and nodded. Then, checking her needle-gun for full load, she set out to climb the knoll.

At the top she paused for breath—the slope was steep—and surveyed the tree. To catch the lowest branch she had to jump, but then she swung up and climbed with fair ease. She didn't look away yet—time for that, when she was as high as she could go.

She got higher than she expected; twice she had to halt and get her breath. Then the trunk and branches thinned enough that

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her movements made the whole thing wobble. All right; far enough. Time to do some looking.

She knew, from riding aircars, that seeing a piece of country at a slant was different from looking straight down on it. Now she squinted at a flat angle to the far terrain, into the setting sun, and tried to make out any features at all, let alone Tregare's two rivers. She saw red glare of sun, soft green foliage brilliantly backlit at this hour, shadows she couldn't interpret. And far out on the plain, a great patch of mist. Past it, something now glittered and then didn't, the pattern repeating. Ocean? From Sassden they hadn't seen it, but this place was higher, with nothing much in the way. Yes, she decided finally. She couldn't judge the distance, but sure as peace that was ocean sparkling at her.

She brought her gaze back to the mist; nothing definite, there. Nearer, she looked—and briefly two bright curving lines flashed at her, then disappeared. She slit her eyes, fixed on that area and waited. Again the flashes came, and then—



maybe due to cloud movement-steadied to a lesser brightness but remained. Yes-Tregare's rivers, and for a moment she saw where they met. His direction-guess had been a little off, but not badly.

With thumb and forefinger she gauged the angle between that junction and the sun's setting point; to clinch it she measured the separation on her other hand. AH right; she wouldn't lose it now.

She looked again, over the entire oddly-angled landscape. More shadows grew; the sun was close to gone; she saw no new features. Time to get down, while the light held. For the first time she looked to the ground below, and was surprised at the height she'd reached. Slowly, she began her descent.

It seemed longer than the climb had; hunger always made her tired, and fatigue fostered carelessness. This was no place for sloppy work. So with slow caution she made her way to the ground, and then downhill to the night's camp.

Trent was serving a hot stew. His cooking had improved a lot, since the scoutship days. Lisele took her kit and sat between Tregare and Rissa, and told them what she'd seen.

Tregare had her demonstrate the finger-angle, duplicated it with his own hand, and measured off from the spot where sun-glow made twilight brightest. Then he nodded. "The notch across there, with the clump of trees in it. That's our line of march." Making the same test, Lisele agreed. Then, while the

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others talked, she ate in silence. Thinking, *he didn't compliment me any*. She smiled. *Because he knows I don't need it*. Then his arm hugged her shoulders, and she decided that a little appreciation didn't hurt, after all!

Later, in full dark except for stars and two tiny moons, with the fire down to embers, Lisele lay breathing deeply, and sleep came.

Terror woke her-thunder above and Hearing, coming down on them. Someone keened a wail that hurt her ears-Stonzai? No human, surely. A thick curse; she couldn't tell if the mumble was Tregare or Hagen. Rissa, sharply: "Do *not* know who it is. Do *not!* As Tregare said-" The voice trailed into a moan, and pain clawed into Lisele's head.

Up and running downhill, unable to see, she grazed a tree and caromed off another, fell and rose and ran through brush that raked skin as the other thing raked inside her mind. She heard little noises from her mouth but couldn't stop making them. Sensing, now, rather than seeing obstacles, she avoided them; she knew they were there in the same way she knew something hunted her. She kept running, while part of her mind wondered how and why she could do it.

The thing found her! Her sensing failed; a great blow came as she crashed into something and tasted blood and fell flat and rolled aside, curling up small so there'd be less of her to hurt. Inside her head blazed agony; outside, a crashing impact shook the ground.

She couldn't take any more. With one deep breath she sought escape, mind-stop, the nirvana of the alpha state.

Near the edge of consciousness she felt the claws hesitate and leave her mind. Without volition her slow, trained breathing continued-not enough, after that exhausting headlong run, to give her full awareness. Suspended between sleep and waking she lay without thought. In her mind, pictures flashed, and feelings-but before she could recognize them, they vanished.

After a time she calmed, near to normal sleep but still able to maintain the alpha state that had saved her. Hours passed; she stayed unmoving. She knew she should get up, find her way back-but she couldn't, yet.

It was when she'd decided she had to try, that she heard the shuffling and felt the mind-touch. She froze her thought-deep breaths, no cognition-and waited. Then something picked her up, something warm and dry. And she felt herself carried farther down the hill.

XX. Elzh

Long away now, the ship from nothing, with Elzh left to mourn the two Tsa ships the thing had killed. Only three remaining, Elzh had, and one damaged, not able to rise to follow Tsa-Drin directive. For long it sat, far around planet-curve from mindbeast places, while Tsa worked to make it again useful. Elzh with two good ships could not leave hurt one behind; Tsa-Drin or no, Tsa would not abandon Tsa on mindbeast world. As correct, thought Elzh-



understood, or not understood.

Two ships, able. Not enough to give this beastworld death. To wait, then. Heal third ship and follow those gone to next world of Tsa-Drin chart. To wait-and to learn, always.

And face mindbeasts in some and other time. One beast ship came from distance, defied Tsa for short time only and went chased away without chance to bespeak this world. And from ground here, beastships made bid to rise-once, twice and again. But dropped back when met by Elzh's two. And the way one dropped, it would not rise more.

Healing of Elzh's third ship was slow and slow. Other two, except for now and ever landing to add supplies, kept orbit several world-cycles, to use least fuel. Then joined the third, on ground, to use none at all. Drone tankers, orbiting outer planet, must be conserved. If beastships rose, though, or came from distance, Tsa ships lay ready. As correct, as understood.

And now again, from distance, came beastship.

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XXI. Ivan

On Inconnu Deux, time passed-roughly, one day for twenty of Earth's or two dozen of Shaarbant's. Finally, watching the far-range detectors, Jeremy Crowfoot spotted Shaarbant's sun ahead.

In Control, Ivan called council; from his drive-room post, Peleter attended by intercom. "Let's get to it," Ivan said. "Tregare's plan hinged on our getting out and back in a hurry, with FTL-drive working fully. Seeming to escape, then flashing back out of super-C when the Tsa didn't expect us. Instead we've been gone for several Shaarbant-years, and can't be sure how many-and we're sub-light and limping. So it's a whole new ball game." He caught himself thumb-twiddling, and stopped. "Open for good ideas."

Alina Rostadt said that without the Hoyfarul Drive working, if they followed Tregare's plan they'd be three months, objective time, getting back again. Anders Kobolak said that if they slowed to a quarter-C, maybe even an eighth, they could make the intended punitive pass and still be too fast to catch. Dacia pointed out that any sub-light approach to Shaarbant left the *Deux* detectable, going in. Jeremy Crowfoot didn't consider that problem too serious; the Tsa might get ships up to intercept, but how much could they do against something passing at a quarter-C?

Fine discussion, Ivan thought-until Dacia had to shoot it down. He'd left that part to her, and was glad she didn't wait too long before speaking up. "Let's forget all the fly-by options," she said, "because we can't afford any of them."

Ivan wished he could see how people took Dacia's words, because this was only the first of several jolts the group would get, soon. He also wished he could remember who knew what,

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but he couldn't. Now Alina said, "You're saying we're low on fuel?"

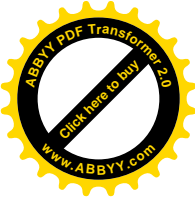
No such thing, Dacia assured everybody; if necessary, the *Deux* could get itself back to Earth. "Not us with it, though- not alive. That's the crunch, shipmates. We're low on food."

Protest was loud; Ivan lost patience and outshouted everybody. "Doesn't anybody on here, besides Dacia, monitor the inventory readouts?" Silence; Ivan nodded. "Then listen to her."

What Dacia told was what she and Ivan had agreed on, and all true. "We have to have a plan," she said, after much talk, "that lets us land on Shaarbant now, or-"

"Or *what!*" Ivan couldn't identify the voice.

He spoke, anyway. "Or get us somewhere else, safely."



New discussion; in this one, Ivan had more to say. "Tregare, he's holed-up somewhere on Shaarbant. I hope." *And Rissa, and Lisele*, yes. "If we can get down there and find him, in touch with the Shrakken if *they've* survived, maybe we can put something together, to fight the Tsa." He heard murmurs, and spoke up to override them. "The Tsa aren't automatically invincible; from what little we know, numbers count, too." He banged a fist down. "I blew two Tsa ships out of space. Escaping Shaarbant. If we can hook up with the Shrakken on that world, through Tregare, maybe we've got a chance here."

"I'm not sure this is a good question, but it puzzles me." Peleter's quiet voice. "Why didn't we try that the first time?"

"Because we didn't know enough," Ivan said. Peleter was a good man, he reminded himself; no point in getting exasperated. "Tregare wanted the ship safe at all costs; his idea sounded good and it *was* good. We'd never been under Tsa attack, and what did happen was something nobody could have predicted. But now we're stuck with it, and have to work with what we've got."

"Plus the rest of the crew," said Melaine Holmbach, but her voice trailed off. "Oh-of course. If we're short of food..."

"Right." Ivan nodded. "If we *knew* we could land and resupply, we'd rouse them. As it is-" He shrugged. "Too many question marks." And if they couldn't land, if the Tsa were too strong and drove them off? Ivan knew that answer, too-everybody into freeze, including himself, except for Anders. And leave it to the First Hat to get them to Stenevo, and hope the Shrakken there would parley instead of shooting them out of space.

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He knew the answers, yes. That didn't mean he liked them. He smiled toward Dacia. "Let's just hope we *can* land."

They talked longer. Ellalee referred back to the Tsa mental attack. "They caught me cold, before-it was like running a footrace with my knickers down around my ankles." Her quick cough hinted of shyness. "But y'know-if it fits the planning any way, I wouldn't mind another go at those blokes."

Ivan said he'd think on it; certainly, nothing else new was coming out of the discussion. A vague idea worked in the back of his mind, but wouldn't come clear. Finally Anders said, "I think we've got all of it. What's your decision, Captain?"

Ivan turned his blind stare toward the voice. "Tactically? To think, a time longer; there has to be more to it. How soon must we set decel, to choose our course and our approach speed?"

He heard readout tape click out. "Two days, a little less," said Kobolak. "When I get firmer distance readings I'll give you the time more exactly."

"Right; thanks." He swung to face the entire group in turn. "Thank you all, in fact. When I reach a decision, you'll be advised."

He stood, went to the galley and dished up some soup. He heard Dacia follow, but he no longer needed guidance. When he ate, he used the spoon without spilling. Learning such things had been hard, and though he knew it might be a little childish of him, he thoroughly enjoyed showing that he could do them.

Later, in quarters, as he sipped beer and talked with Dacia, his vague idea took form. Instead of a straightforward approach to Shaarbant, what if they went diving in as if for a sling turn? "Set to point us toward Stenevo's coordinates, if it comes up we have to go through with it."

"Why Stenevo?" Then, "Oh, of course. We came here to help the Shrakken, so-"

He nodded. "If we can't do it here, we'll do it there. But if the odds look good, or we can improve them any, we go decel and land." The tension was getting to him, though-all the waiting, and now the need to decide. He had some time, yet, to reconsider. But to use it well, he'd have to be more relaxed.

Dacia suggested they go to bed for a while; he said she must have been reading his mind. When they got up, without asking his preference she poured him bourbon over ice in place of the beer he'd been nursing. Tasting it, he smiled. "Don't know what

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I'd do without you." And somehow it no longer hurt him to admit it.

They talked late, coming back to old ideas when new ones turned out to be blind alleys. Then, in the middle of discussing a variation on the sling approach, Ivan



stopped. "Wait a minute. I think-" Then he nodded. "As far as the Shrakken know, the Tsa don't have scoutships. We still have one aboard."

"Ivan! You have a way-?"

"Not yet. But it's a wild card, the only one I can think of. I don't know just how to use it, but there's time to figure something."

He drained his glass and held it up. "Pour me another?"

Waking, Ivan decided he hadn't drunk enough to hang him over. He felt good. Hearing no sound of Dacia, he got up and lumbered to the intercom, and called the galley. She was there.

"I haven't eaten yet, Ivan. Jeremy and I are drinking coffee, working up an appetite. Shall I bring two trays down?"

"No, thanks-but if you want to fill them, that's fine. Heavy with the eggs on mine, please. I'll be right up." His shower was sketchy; he put on the first shirt and trousers and sandals he happened to find. He hadn't worn his skipper's hat for some time and he didn't bother with it now, either. Going upship he practiced taking the steps two at a time, fingers on handrail for guidance.

At the galley he paused. "Over here," said Dacia. With hands outstretched to detect obstacles he walked quickly to her and sat; a moment's listening spotted his target for a good-morning kiss. Only one other person breathed nearby. "Morning, Jeremy." At the man's intake of breath, Ivan laughed. "Dacia said you were here."

Chuckling, Crowfoot said, "One on me, that." While they ate, Ivan told his ideas for tactics at Shaarbant. When he mentioned the scoutship, Crowfoot asked, "Are you thinking of it as a major factor, or some sort of decoy?"

Ivan leaned forward. "So far, I'd figured on the *Deux* drawing attention so maybe the scout could slip past and land first. I admit, I haven't considered all the angles. Or I wouldn't be asking."

Later, in Control, he talked with Ellalee. Concerning the scoutship, she said, "I wouldn't try landing that thing, but I'm

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bloody sure I could fly it, otherwise. So if-" She took a deep breath, as though preparing for exertion, then continued. "Riding copilot, say I was, and the flarnin' Tsa do their mind-clawing trick. Well, you see, if I *could* hang onto control of me, might be I could get us out of range, what with the planet's curvature and all. You see?"

"Maybe." Ivan nodded. "And then what?" "And then, given time and safety, the real pilot would be recovered, and could land us, wherever."

Ivan felt himself smiling. "That's not bad, Ellalee. Dacia- you've got it noted?" He heard her stylus on the paper, and nodded as he spoke.

Crowfoot thought the scout should be an unmanned weapon, its drive hyped past red-line to max, and set to blow on impact. Ivan shook his head. "In a big operation, yes. In fact that's the way-on Ilse Krueger's advice-I got Admiral Ozzie Newhausen, in the battle for Earth. But here we have just the ship and the scout, and neither's expendable on a one-shot gamble."

It all came down to Ivan's own decision, and now he'd made it. In quarters, over after-dinner tea. He got up and went to the intercom; from Control, Anders Kobolak answered. "Any orders?"

"Yes. For now, red-line max decel. When we know our distance better, we can adjust from that."

Silence. Then, "Right, Captain. You've chosen your plan?" "I've made the choice that gives the most options. That's all."

Kobolak sounded hesitant. "If you say so." I "After your watch, we'll talk. Marchant out." Feeling the wall to get his angle right, he made his way back to his chair. Dacia asked if he wanted anything; he settled for a beer. Then he talked, and the more he explored the sling idea, the better he liked it. "The dead sling, they won't spot us early, with luck. When they do, we have-" On his fingers he ticked the options. "Go to a power sling; tighter in, that would be." If need be, use the accel to boost them off toward Stenevo. "Or with real luck, get Shaarbant between us and the Tsa, pour on decel and sit down. Dive and plow air. Have to spot Sassden and Shtegel first, though; once we hit air there won't be time to find our ass with both hands. Not with the Tsa chasing us."



"And do you think there's any chance we *can* land?" Through his tension, Ivan tried to smile. "I purely hope so."

Ivan was in no mood for sex, but Dacia was, and when he went along with her wish he was surprised how well things went. It was odd, he thought; sometimes they'd leave each other alone for days, and then it'd be *all* the time. Well, now might be their last chances, ever-so why not?

Then, sitting up, she asked more questions about Shaarbant. He was tired; his most recent sleep was long hours ago. But he knew she wanted to help, so he tried to concentrate. And it paid off-because suddenly he knew how he was going to use the scoutship.

"Whatever move me *Deux* makes, Dacia, that looks crucial-" Ivan blinked; there was no pain to it now. "-that's when the scout drops free. To land, or play decoy, or whatever-we can't know yet."

She touched his cheek and said, "There's one thing you know, that you haven't told me. Ivan-*who goes on that scout?*"

Well, he hadn't expected to fool her; he sighed. "Ellalee rides copilot, as we discussed, in case she can get the scout through any Tsa attack. For the rest-the scout's detectors have auxiliary audible alarms, and of course, the landing sensors have to work that way. In case of dust, and all. So-" He waited; she made no protest.

He reached, fumbled, and then held her. "Yes, of course, Dacia. When that scout leaves the *Deux*, I'll be on it."

One hand gripped his shoulder; the nails of the other dug into his neck. "You said-you said you had to keep this ship safe, for Tregare. And you haven't-not yet. Ivan-"

Her nails drew blood; he shook his head, and she moved the hand away. He said, "Once I commit the ship to its best choice of action, my job's done. Anders can do the rest, and I couldn't. But what I *can* do, then, is choose options for the scout, to help give *Inconnu Deux* its best licks."

"No-Ivan, you're trying to take too much on yourself. You-"

Both his hands found her head, running fingers through her hair and fondling one ear. "*Think*, Dacia! When the scout drops away, the ship's committed but the scout isn't. So where does *command* lie?"

Three breaths she took, before speaking. "Yes, Ivan-you

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have to go where the choices are. Of course." One more breath. "I agree-so long as I go with you."

His answer came unthought. "I figure the scout's odds about 50-50. If that's good enough for you-well, the ship's chances are much the same, come to that. In the long run." Dacia hugged him, and Ivan decided he'd made a deal.

Next morning, before he and Dacia had breakfast, they and Ellalee moved their "landing kits" to the scout. Then it was time to announce the decision.

Anders Kobolak didn't like it. Alina had had breakfast with Ivan and Dacia before relieving her husband; now while the two drank coffee, he had his off-watch meal. For Ellalee it was lunch.

Ivan repeated his arguments but Anders still disagreed. "You say you'll have given your last possible decisive command before the scout leaves the ship. How can you be sure of that?"

Ivan shrugged. "The last big one, I said. And likely the last I *could* give effectively, being unable to see the situation directly. In a fast crisis, Anders, my command presence could kill you-if you waited for answers instead of making your own choices."

"He's right and you know it." Dacia sounded irritated at her brother. "We've been over all the variations we could think of, and this looks like everybody's best chance."

Ivan cleared his throat. "If you come up with anything new, Kobolak, we'll certainly give it a hearing. But otherwise we'll use the scout the way I said."

The dead sling around Shaarbant was Ivan's initial choice- and its vector requirements the touchiest. With that approach, though, they could switch to another of the alternatives at any point. Anders kept Ivan informed of their speed and distance; they were close enough to Shaarbant, he said, that from this angle the



planet showed a lopsided disk. And so far, neither screens nor emission detectors showed any sign of *Tsa* ships.

The orbit *Crowfoot* gave them, to arc around *Shaarbant*, was a cometary-a hyperbola with asymptote-angle of about a radian. "And cutting air just enough, I hope, to let us bend our path wherever we need it." This far out, they couldn't insert yet; most of the time, comets and other debris travel slowly. *Crowfoot* gave them a least-time course to meet orbit outside

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estimated *Tsa* detector range. "With a twenty percent margin, of course."

"And even cutting it that fine," said Ivan, "we'll be a long time to *Shaarbant*." Couldn't be helped, though. Simulating a dead object in natural orbit-that's what Ivan was betting on.

"Just so they don't take too close a look."

Ivan sweat it all the way, but they did reach orbit safely. *Crowfoot* took readings and made adjustments, then gave *Anders* the okay to cut the drive, and all ship's power except maintenance and control functions. The rest was keyed to the drive switch; if the ship was brought to life, it would wake all at once, driving at red-line max. The computer chewed viewscreen data and spit out the thrust angles for changing, at any moment, to the power sling maneuver. Right now, there was nothing more anyone could do.

Well inside estimated detector range, instruments registered the first search beam. One blip and no repeat-and twice more, hours apart, the same thing happened. "Automatic scanners?" No one knew; Ivan shook his head. The fourth beam passed but then returned, and for several seconds wavered back and forth across the *Deux's* position. Until the blip disappeared, no one spoke; then they could relax.

"Nobody home but us comets," said *Ellalee*. "Absolutely nobody."

"Let's hope they believe that," Ivan said. Shrugging tension from neck and shoulders, he was surprised it went so easily. Now that they were committed-to a fixed set of alternatives, at least-somehow the waiting bothered him less.

Until *Crowfoot* told him, he hadn't considered that no comet could orbit a planet; anything doing a cometary around a moving world could only be sheerest coincidence. But if the idea had fooled him, maybe it'd get past the *Tsa*, too.

One thing for sure; he couldn't afford to worry about it.

Their orbit bent; curvature grew as *Shaarbant's* gravity took firmer hold. Ever faster, *Inconnu Deux* fell toward the calculated near-miss, and still no sign from the deadly, waiting *Tsa*.

"You're sure?" said Ivan. If he could *see* the damned screens-!

"Not a peep, not a glimmer," said *Ellalee*. "Don't fret you, Captain. First pop, I'll have *Anders* up here to take over, before there's time to say squat."

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Ivan chuckled; *Dacia*, beside him, squeezed his hand. He said, "Time-distance readings again, please, to closest passage on this orbit." *Ellalee* read the figures; he nodded, then sighed and turned to *Dacia*. "Too long and far to sit up without sleep. Too soon and near, though, to chance sleep in quarters and maybe get caught out. Time we moved to the scout, do you think?"

"Probably," she said. "Shall we check quarters once more first, to see if we've left anything we really should take along?"

"Why not? And, *Ellalee*-soon as you're off watch, you move in, too. If action happens before that, come *running!*"

"Sure as you know." So they left, gathered a few items from quarters, and began settling in on the scout. The left-hand screens were tandemed through to Control; *Dacia* checked with *Ellalee* to make sure the hookup was working. It was.

Ivan sat in chief pilot's position. He put his board on test status and began to feel it out, to familiarize himself again with the controls he might need to operate. Twice he made errors, but kept his curses down to a mumble. He stayed with the chore until he felt he knew the board as well as he ever would, and put it operational again. "If I have to," he said, "and it's not unlikely, I can land this thing. Especially if somebody watches the back screens for me and picks a good place to set down."

Dacia touched his shoulder. "That's good. I landed a scout once, but a long time ago. And *Ellalee* never has."



They hadn't eaten, so now they did. Then they laid the seats back, and not bothering to undress, they slept.

A noise woke Ivan. He sat up, and in moments remembered where he was. Quietly, Ellalee said, "Sorry, skipper; bumped my kitbag against the airlock hatch. I'll go backship now, and doss down."

"Wait a minute." He spoke as softly as she had. "You're off watch? What's our situation?"

"Closing in, going faster." She sounded excited, a little. First giving the time, she said, "About four hours until our tight pass starts, and still not the sign of any Tsa intercept."

"Good. All right, Ellalee; get some rest." She left; the rear door closed gently; he lay back again, and dozed. Between sleep and waking, his mind searched the chances ahead. But he must have slept, because when he smelled coffee he had heard no sounds of whoever made it.

Abruptly, he sat up. "The time! How long before the sling turn starts?"

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"Seventy minutes, a little more." Dacia's voice. "I've been keeping tabs, Ivan. I'd have woke you soon."

Reassured, he said, "Yes, I know. Ellalee still sleeping?"

"She's aboard?" Dacia sounded surprised. "Oh, of course; she's off watch, long since. I didn't wake up when she came in, though, so--"

"I did." He was getting the seat up straight again. The smell of coffee came closer, and when he had the seat properly upright, Dacia handed him a cup. "Thanks. Well-still waiting, are we?" He opened the intercom circuit. "Anders? Ivan. What word?"

"Crowfoot here. Anders had to take a little walk. Should be back in a minute. He--"

"Who's got the con? Jeremy-you're no pilot!" Alina was, some-but not for *this*. He turned aside-should he have Dacia roust Ellalee out and get her up there? But damn it all, she was needed *here*....

Mildly, Crowfoot said, "There'll be time, Ivan. To start the power-sling, all I'd have to do is push the button; the computer's feeding the proper angle constantly, you know that. Then Anders would come running and take over."

Ivan had to work at calming himself, but he did it. Crowfoot's view of the situation was ridiculously optimistic; yelling wouldn't help, though. All he said was, "Kobolak better hurry it up."

Alina's voice came. "I'll go tell him." Fingers drumming, Ivan waited, and finally Anders Kobolak said, "All right, I'm back. And I think my guts will let me stay put, now. What was the emergency?"

Ivan choked back the first answer that came to mind, and said, "The idea, I think, is not to have one. Report?"

Anders read off speed, distance and approach-angle. "Do you still want to drop, if possible, at point-two radians short of perigee?"

"The computer likes it," said Ivan, "so I won't argue."

"All right," said Crowfoot. "I'll put the readout on your screen, with an audio countdown on the pickup button."

"Good enough." Checking that button, Ivan heard the faint tones of the numerical series, counting off the seconds.

Not long now. "Okay, thanks. Marchant out."

And Dacia said, "I'd better get Ellalee up."

While the Australian woman ate, Dacia got the downviewer on her right-hand screen, and kept Ivan informed. "We're

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coming in over the side of Shaarbant we don't know. There's a subcontinent, of sorts, at the rear horizon. Some speckles at the far one-maybe the archipelago where Shtegel is, the port Tregare went to."

"Then Sassden, where *we* were, is farside of the planet?" "Has to be," said Ellalee Ganelong. "Billy-o hiding out on us."

Ivan grinned. "You sound cheerful enough." "So do you," she said-and he had to laugh, and wondered why. Then he knew. The Tsa had blinded him-how, he didn't



know-and crippled his ship and cost it years of planets' time. But now, if those devils were still here, something was going to *happen*. His death, it could be; he knew that. But either way- long enough, he'd waited blind.

All he said was, "A glum mind wouldn't help much, would it?"
Before she could answer, the intercept alarm shrieked.

"Two ships rising." Kobolak's voice. "Tsa, I'd expect. Coming around from darkside, and with fair speed up already."

Ivan leaned forward. He shook his head. *Words*-all he could get now, and they weren't enough to tell him what he needed.

"Can they intercept the dead-sling turn? Jeremy-what's the computer's guess?"

He heard Crowfoot and Kobolak talking, low-voiced, but couldn't make out what they said. Before impatience made him shout for an answer, Anders spoke. "No physical intercept possible. But they can get within mind-attack range, or close to it."

"What if we go into the power sling?"

"A moment." Crowfoot. Then, "Close, still, but I think we can keep safe distance, just barely."

Ivan's seconds stretched. No time to think, though-and, he decided, no reason to, either. "Drop us. Drop us and hit the power sling." He paused; another idea came. "Anders, Jeremy- are we slow enough that you could bend a tight loop, crabwise acceleration, clear around Shaarbant, and catch them from where they don't expect?"

"Hey!" Kobolak sounded startled. "Might, at that. Should I?"

If Anders wouldn't decide, Ivan would. "Yes! Now drop us."

Shuddering, the scout plunged; the peeps and trills of its sensors drowned in the ionic roar of the *Deux's* drive, raging into

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full blast. Ivan waited until sound and motion quieted; then he said, "Reports?"

For moments, only, the scout's drive fired. Dacia said, "There. We were a little too high and too fast. I gave a touch of back-vector, to get us into air sooner, while the ship's drive still masked ours."

"Can you see the Tsa ships?"

"Right pouring it on, they are," said Ellalee. "Trying at intercept, but the *Deux's* out for showing them a clean pair of heels."

Ivan turned up the audio on the detector circuits, but with three ships to scan, the signals were so much hash. He shook his head, and cut the sound to the edge of audibility. "Soon as they're out of sight, get us downstairs fast. Hedgehopping's the slow way to get around Shaarbant, but we're less apt to be detected."

"Yes, Ivan." The scout felt the first tugs of atmosphere, and made a little bounce. "Still too fast; we skipped. Wait, though-"

"Sure." It couldn't be too much longer, now.

Then she said, "There goes the *Deux*-past the horizon, I mean, out of view. And the Tsa-*no!* They're swinging around, coming back."

Now the bleeps were easier to read, and his hearing told him the story. Two ships, close together as sensed from such a distance, slowly approaching at an angle that crossed the scout's path. Not a collision course, but passing within easy detector range. "Ivan-what shall we do?"

The trouble was, he didn't have the faintest idea.

As he waited, the sounds changed. "Those ships-Dacia, are they separating?" Nearly an hour, it had been, since the *Deux* vanished.

"Yes. One's moving off to our left. The other, though- now it's headed almost straight at us."

As much to himself as to the others, Ivan said, "They've got a lot of accel on us, but we can turn quicker. For what that's worth, here. I mean, once they spot us in mind-range..."

The indicator noises wavered. "Now that's odd." Ellalee sounded puzzled. "Why the circling?"

"Both of them?" he asked.

"Just the one ahead of us," said Dacia. "It keeps turning. The other's headed straight away, and climbing."

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"Climbing? What for?" What kind of tactic was that?



Ellalee spoke. "To get a wider view, would you suppose?"

"Maybe." The nearer ship stayed in its turn. The scout touched air again; no bounce, this time. "Now we'll start slowing." Ivan waited. Ahead the Tsa ship completed a circle and straightened its course-roughly toward the scout, but now high above it.

And the other Tsa turned and dove headlong, swooping back toward the scout's course but pointing behind it. The sounds told Ivan only part of this, but the women kept him informed. Then, almost shrieking, Ellalee cried, "On the back screen-it's the *Deux!*"

Ivan felt his mouth hang open, and shut it. Then he snapped his fingers. "The Hoyfarul Drive! Anders-or Jeremy, more likely-figured how to get some advantage out of it. All that extra accel-even if they can only use short bursts, to keep from blowing it up. Come on, *Deux!*" He gripped Dacia's arm. "I can't make anything out of the sound indicators now. What's happening?"

As she told him, minute by minute he tried to visualize it. The Tsa above made for *Inconnu Deux*, which opened fire at a slant-"All six of the traversing turrets, probably." -and swung ship to improve the angle. Still short of effective range, but that range closed fast, and-

"They got the bugger!" Ellalee shouted it.

"Its drive, they got," Dacia corrected her. "The ship's still there, but drifting. Slight outbound vector." And above and behind the scout, the *Deux* hurtled toward the remaining Tsa.

Then the human ship faltered. Its drive field flickered and vanished, then after long seconds, reappeared. Paler now, though, and less intense. Hearing that, Ivan nodded. "Blew the Hoyfarul setup again, once and for all. Now-"

"Wait! Something-" Dacia paused. "They've fired a missile-the *Deux*, I mean. I thought you said you'd used them all up."

"No, just two. And no luck with either of them." He waited; missiles were high-gee *fast*, but still they took time, to travel.

Ellalee gasped; Ivan heard her clap her hands. "Some luck *this* time, I'll tell you. They holed her. The Tsa drive field-it's flickering like a wet squib."

But now the *Deux's* field died completely; projectors silent, that ship drifted on toward its enemy. And with only the two

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ships ahead, the sound indicators clearly showed Ivan their movements.

He cursed. "The mind attack! They'll slide right into it. Helpless!" Only one thing to do. "Ellalee, I'll take the controls."

The only question was, could he do it, when the Tsa attack came? And if he couldn't, could Ellalee? And *would* she? Quietly, guiding the scout by sound as he eased its drive up to full power, he talked to the two women.

"The *Deux's* a sitting duck; the Tsa can kill everyone who's awake, then board her. They can do away with the freeze-riders at leisure, and have the ship-and the Hoyfarul Drive. The *Deux's* is blown, but the plans are aboard, and clear enough. So the Tsa, not the Shrakken, will have FTL capability."

As the scout left atmosphere, Ivan said, "They'll have the ship's star charts, that show Earth and most of our colonies. They won't know our computer coding but they must know the principles or they wouldn't be here. So they'll figure it all out, eventually-and come after humanity as they've gone after the Shrakken."

Ellalee interrupted. "Why all this, Ivan? We both know it."

"Because if their attack stops me, Ellalee, then it's up to you. So I have to be sure you understand how important it is that the *Deux* isn't captured."

"Jolly right I do. Look here, Ivan Marchant! Ramming that ship, with the drive to blow on impact, isn't my first choice of a way to sign out. But that's what you mean, and I see the need as well as you, and if it comes to me I'll do it. Anything more?"

"Just, I'm proud to know you." He listened as the scout, building speed, arced up toward the Tsa ship. For the moment it didn't need him; he pulled Dacia to him and kissed her. "Sorry, love. Sometimes things can't be helped." The worst of it was, pain was the last thing she'd ever feel.

He got closer than he'd expected, the beeps told him, before mind-touch came. Dacia took a shuddering breath; Ellalee whispered, "I'm blanking my mind, hiding. Wish me luck."



At first it didn't hurt, exactly. Exploring? Then he adjusted course, and as he acted with intention, the pain struck. Teeth gritting, Ivan held on, and vaguely sensed something different this time. It was *pushing* him, and when he let it, the pain eased. But the push was to sheer off, to miss the. Tsa ship. He brought

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the scout back on line, and the pain *clawed*. Dacia whimpered, then screamed. From Elialee he heard no sound.

The push reversed; he overcontrolled and fought to recover. Again it changed, and again-back and forth, shaking him. He was tiring fast, and there was still a long way to go. He fought for breath to speak and said, "Ellalee? Take over for a spell?"

She must have nodded, forgetting he couldn't see, because after a moment she said, "Sorry. Yes," and he felt the controls move against his hands. He relaxed his own grip and let her have dominance, his own hands merely following the moves she made. He felt the pressure fade in his mind, and at the same time he heard Ellalee groan.

Now, breathing deeply while he could, Ivan listened to the bleeps that told him the scout's course. She was doing well, he decided-overcontrolling at first but then adjusting to the Tsa pummeling. Ellalee's breathing, though, came ever harsher, and faster and more shallow-and in the background Ivan heard a quiet, muffled sobbing from Dacia, as though her face were buried in her hands. He reached, fumbled and found her shoulder, but when he squeezed it, she flinched, so he let go.

It seemed a long time that he had partial respite, before the scout's movements became jerky and the tones showed it mostly off-course. Ellalee tried to say something-half groan, half shout-but no clear words came. The controls, though, shuddered against Ivan's hands, so he knew what she meant. "All right," he said. "I'll take it." And as he resumed control and set his intention, pain struck again, trying to push him aside from his target. Stubbornly, with renewed strength after his breather, he horsed the scout-back on line.

Briefly he wished he could thank Ellalee, congratulate her for a good job. Because she'd bought him time and distance he couldn't have managed on his own; her hunch, about her ability to resist the Tsa, had paid off. If they'd been out to escape rather than attack, her effort would have got them free. But he couldn't thank her; he had no control of his voice. He heard himself sobbing, and he couldn't stop. It was all he could do to keep bringing the scout back on course, and now he began to wonder if his strength would hold out long enough, for what he had to do.

He threw the autopilot on circuit; it wasn't fast or accurate enough for this job, but it could do part of the work, and his own motions still overrode. The pain peaked, not pushing now, then

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leveled back. With bitten lips he grinned; he could stand it! He felt a numbness, a level beyond which the pain no longer grew.

In the back of his head, a fumbling; a clenched thing opened, stabbing flame across his mind. Light seemed to flash, then vanished, then came again. He tried to ignore it, to concentrate on the sounds that told him his course. But then-

The screens, the control panel! The light wasn't inside his head-he was seeing! And he saw that the sound indicators were off mark; their heading would have him miss the Tsa ship. He corrected course, and blackness replaced the burst of vision.

Minutes still to go, but not many now. Again the light came, dimly this time-and with it the push of pain. Against his will he let the scout veer; the pain eased and his vision returned. He corrected course; more pain, and again darkness. Pain, push, flicker of light-Ivan was off course as often as on it, but always he brought the scout back on aim, and always pain and blindness rewarded him.

Maybe another relief spell? He let the scout drift, so that he could ask Ellalee, but in a quick flash of vision he saw her shake her head. "I can't! When I hide I can't move, now, and if I move the pain stops ^ne. Ivan-I'm sorry!" As soon as she spoke he wrenched at the controls again, so he couldn't answer; he literally couldn't form words and keep control of what he did. Pain and push varied at a stepped-up rate; his muscles jerked and his heart raced toward fibrillation. The scout swung far aside; as he paused, shaken, gauging the course correction, the pain stopped and his vision carne bright and clear.

Then he knew-*somebody's trying to make a deal!* How to find out for sure, though? Mind-touch, without pain, pawed at him. He checked his speed and distance; time was short, but he still had some. Deliberately letting the scout stay off-course, slowing a bit, he spoke aloud. "Our ship. Leave it alone. And the planet-our people there, and



the Shrakken, too. Or else-" He twitched the scout's course toward the Tsa ship, then away; mind-touch came and went and came, then dwindled to a sensation he could barely feel. *Agreement?* Briefly he had time to wonder why *seeing* didn't thrill him, but no emotion came.

The Tsa ship turned; weak and fitfully its drive field bloomed, moving it away from *Inconnu Deux's* drifting approach and nearer to the scout's path. Mind-touch strengthened, but short of pain. Still slowing, Ivan guided the scout away a little more, and the touch lessened further.

He looked aside; Dacia sat with eyes wide and cheeks

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tear-streaked. Beside her Ellalee lay back, her eyes closed, breathing slowly. Ivan motioned and said, "She looks peaceful enough. Came through pretty well *in* the clutch, too."

"Ivan! You can *see!*" She hugged him, clung to him.

"Yeah. Something *they* did." Quickly he told her what he thought had happened, was still happening.

"Then it's peace, Ivan? We don't have to-"

While he thought about it, he let her talk. It would be nice to believe the easy answer, but he wasn't sure he could manage that.

It was the Tsa *power*, like UET's in the old days, like UET's Total Welfare center that had so nearly destroyed him. People like Colonel Osbert Newhausen, who had offhandedly killed a lot of folks including the parents of Ivan and Rissa. And Newhausen's grandson, Ozzie the admiral-well, Ivan had gotten *him*, all right....

But all of them-they could do to you what they wanted, when they wanted, and there wasn't bloody hell you could do about it. He had the Tsa on the hook right now, and they knew it-they'd tried to push him off *and by God they couldn't do it*.

But once he let the hook loose, who was to say what the Tsa would do? *You can't trust power*. To save *Inconnu Deux*, for sure, this one handle was all he had.

And he'd promised Tregare.

Dacia was still saying how nice it all was; his kiss stopped her. Then he said, "I'm sorry. I do love you." *And you, Il se!* He threw the switches; the scout swung and accelerated.

At this range, even the autopilot couldn't miss.

The Tsa must not have sensed his intention. Ivan Marchant felt no pain at all.

XXIIEELZH

Screenblinks marked beastship's coming. Elzh's ships, both, rose. Soon screens showed the other clearly-and Elzh saw it to be the ship that had come from nothing! Now, though, it came from distance, like any ship.

A trick? (Tserln). *No matter* (Idsath); *it lacks speed for tricks*. Indling, the two aided Elzh to soothe Ceevt, the growing young, so Elzh's mind could go free to probe when beastship neared more.

Pain, and pain! Beastship's speed escaped Elzh's ships; then the thing came back before anything *could*, and struck. Elzh's driving-forces dead, his other ship weakened-but the beastship floating helpless, also! Mindsaying, Elzh planned.

But then of sudden, *small* ship, like the one Elzh attacked before. Not from nothing, this thing-only not seen until it rose from cloud and neared other Tsa ship. Elzh's mind reached there, sensed pain and effort between Tsa and mindbeasts in small ship. From sub-commander in other Tsa ship, came mind-touch: *It almost understands.* *Great Elzh, I try further!* Bat only instants more, and small beastship hurtled to implode itself and Tsa to gases.

Effort now, frantic to give driving force to Elzh's ship before beastship can again move; ion-flickers showed that mind-beasts worked to bring their own ship alive. *They must not be first, or we die.*

With Tsa and beasts drifting apart, no mind-touch and no pain. But as Elzh felt drive-force return, beastship's drive flared more bright, then died. Elzh made decision and gave command- before beastship had power to follow, Elzh's ship to go away



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around planet-curve, and Sand, and not be killed by beast-madness. For if small ship would kill all in it, to kill Tsa, what might the ship from nothing do?

Landing came not well; drive forces waned, left little margin from all-death. Moments from grounding, thrust from mindbeasts below blurred control of the Tsa making land-touch. Once assuring of the ship-down with safeness but damaged not to rise again, for longtimes-Elzh saw to Ceevt, that the young had wellbeing. And then left ship, went to ground. Asking no Tsa-not Tserln, not Idsath. But carrying a firepiece that could kill Tsa *or* mindbeast.

Down ground and up, Elzh walked long and long. Mind kept away from beast-touch ahead, though pain came random, pouring and rolling and then away gone. Came feeling of a mind holding itself closed. Caution, Elzh used in reaching. Very gently, not to disturb-and Elzh found that mind. And walked to it, where it lay. Seeing not with light, only with mind, Elzh tried to know. To learn-as always, as correct, as understood.

And, as needed, *decision*. To take this mind-closed beast to Tsa ship. *To learn*. Dread, pain, danger, death! Yes. But if need came, Elzh could use firepiece, long enough to kill *any* mindbeast.

XXIII. Lisele

While the thing carried her, moving with its strange, slow rolling gait, Lisele kept her mind still. First she felt descent, then there was the wading of a splashing stream, then a slow climb and another dip-this one to level ground. Finally she was borne up a steep slope and heard metal ring underfoot, and then tiny echoes told her she was inside a ship. Still her eyes and mind stayed closed, because she didn't know what else to do.

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Listening, she sensed differences between corridors and ramps *and* open spaces. Her feet brushed against something and she heard a door close; then she was set down on something partly soft and partly firm, shaped like a shallow bowl. It felt like plastic, but smelled different-spicy, a little.

Sound of feet shuffling; the thing that had brought her was moving back now. But its mind-touch came-not hurting, or not very much, just twinges now and then. Strange feelings came-a hunger not for food or drink, urgency that had nothing to do with anything she knew, a brief sense of peace and then a disgust that recalled every rotten stench she'd ever smelled. And pain struck!

She tried for calm and was failing; she slowed her breathing but it wouldn't stay that way. Then footsteps again, retreating, and she heard the door close.

Now her mind quieted. No doubt about it, the thing had gone.

It was some time before Lisele dared open her eyes. She found herself in a beige-walled room, a perfectly ordinary-looking place with straight surfaces and square corners. The bowl she lay in was bright yellow; it and a sort of beanbag stool of the same color were the only furniture. The lighting was a soft white from panels in the ceiling. The room could have been built by humans.

She started to sit up, then heard sound at the door and lay back as she had been, eyes closed. Again came footsteps, but softer than before; she heard the door shut again. Holding to the alpha-state breathing pattern she awaited mind-touch, but when it came she hardly recognized it-like feathers brushing under her scalp, and a tinkle of tiny chimes. She opened her eyes.

This thing couldn't have carried her-it was too small! The body was robed; all she could guess was that the creature was built hefty for its height, several decimeters less than her own. The head was like some human-animal caricature, neither handsome nor



ugly, that a cartoonist had drawn. The skull rose to a pronounced central ridge, and the ears sat high and well forward. Except for short, rippling fringes around nostril holes set below the ears, no hair was visible, and the skin reminded Lisele of soft, dark leather. Forehead and brow ridges were the most human features; the widest eyes, large and round, never seemed to blink. If there were pupil and iris, both were black; only thin pale rings of yellow showed around the edges.

There were cheekbones of sorts, and a nose that on next

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look turned into all the rest of the face, for no mouth or jaws lay below it. The "nose" was a long hanging muzzle that lay against the neck but could be raised. When it opened slightly, it was the upper jaw that moved. Did the Tsa have teeth? She couldn't be sure.

The feathers and chimes still came, now with other feelings that had to be from the other, not her own mind. But much more gently than from the first Tsa; had they sent an expert? For no reason she felt a twinge of fear, and that brought the first pain this creature had given her. It made a jumpy motion, and now the eyes did blink; the lids closed diagonally.

On a hunch, she spoke aloud, concentrating only on the words themselves. "Please don't hurt me. Why do you do that?"

A flood of images she couldn't sort out, and again the feel of something soft in her head. Like fur, this time. But it all moved too fast; she couldn't follow. She said "Slower, slower," and spoke the words themselves ever more slowly. And the flow did slacken, but still she couldn't recognize much of anything. A lower, there? Maybe; not one she'd ever seen, though. "I'm sorry; I still don't understand."

Now the chimes had a questioning tone. "Not yet," she said. "Keep trying." And something impelled her to start talking a blue streak, about anything and everything. Startled at first, then she relaxed and let the words spill out. Excitement grew, and brought another dart of pain until she heeded her breathing rhythm and kept closer to the alpha state.

Then, in her head, words came. "Are you mindbeast?"

There was no hostility to the question, only curiosity. Through her surprise, almost shock. Lisele realized that *her* mind made the words, out of whatever the other was doing. But she listened as though her ears heard, while the question was repeated. Then she said, "I'm just me-Lisele. Who are you?"

"Ceevt, of the Tsa. Tsa kill mindbeasts. What do you do?" The thing spoke of killing, but its tone was light and friendly. Puzzled, not afraid now, Lisele tried to think what to say next. But before she decided, the door opened again.

The robed Tsa who entered then was bigger, almost Lisele's height and much heavier. Its mind-touch rasped at her once and then faded; she could still feel it, though. Enough to know that here was the one who had brought her. And the thing it held in one hand looked an awful lot like an energy gun.

Her control began to slip; fear surged and pain hit her. She

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sensed something from the two Tsa minds but this time it made no words for her, and then the small one scuttled out and the big one closed the door. Struggling for calm, she shut her eyes again, and waited. She heard feet move toward her, and then stop.

Her only chance was to speak; she knew that, and after a time she managed it. "You don't have to hurt me. Why *do* you?"

Brief stab, then a "voice," fumbling at first. "You hurt *us*, you mindbeasts. The Shrakken first, but your kind too, though not as bad. We only protect ourselves." The creature paused. "But you did not hurt Ceevt, our young, who could not have protected itself. That is why you still live. Why did you spare Ceevt?"

Hard it was, to stay calm then; Lisele gave it her best try. "We never tried to hurt *any* of you. We were trying to stay clear of you, and you came down after us and crashed Tregare's scoutship. And tonight we were minding our own business, didn't even know you were anywhere around, when you began hurting us so awful. We."

Pain struck, then eased; she drew ragged breath and fought again to calm her mind. "Did you do that, just now, on purpose?"

Confusion. "When you give hurt, what can we do except attack in return, force you, to stop? It is reflex, almost instinct."

"Does it work? Do the Shrakken stop?"

Not while they lived, the Tsa admitted. Which made the Shrakken so deadly a



menace, that the Tsa-Drin had dedicated the entire next Great Era to-

"Killing them? Wiping them out?" Pain twinged; Lisele made herself feel detached, as if the whole thing was hypothetical. It worked. She nodded; the rules of the game took a little getting used to, but she was learning. She didn't open her eyes, though.

"But the Shrakken haven't gone looking for you; all they want is to stay away from you. If you'd only leave them alone-"

"They came to us first, those mindbeasts. At start we thought no harm. Then one injured itself and blamed Tsa for the hurt-and threw the pain at all minds, its fear and rage and hate. Long ago, this was; I have only been told. But on both sides, much pain and many dead-all, on theirs. And at the end of it, Tsa and Shrakken cannot both live. When we meet, they give us

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agony-so we give them death. Though the giving costs *us* pain and deaths-or loss of sanity, which is worse to fear."

The creature paused. "You humans are not so ready to hurt, but you have the same power. And you have not answered me. Why did you spare Ceevt, our young?"

She wasn't quite sure what he meant, but she answered anyway. "Because Ceevt didn't hurt *me*. Ceevt's mind-touch-it was nice. Soft and friendly and pleasant. And then we could talk. I thought maybe Ceevt was a communication expert."

"No. Only a young, not yet trained in defense."

Suddenly Lisele knew something she couldn't define. "You, though-the Tsa, among yourselves-don't you ever hurt each other that way?" And from the flood of images, she had her answer.

Carefully, she spoke. "Then normally you have control over what your minds send, but never over what you receive." *Agreement*. "We humans, and the Shrakken, don't even know we're sending anything, so we have no idea of controlling that." *Skepticism*. Hurriedly she said, "What I'm doing is something different. Most people don't even know about it. Some could learn, though. And then maybe-"

She knew she didn't know enough to do a good job of what she was trying to say, but it was a place to start, so she did. If the Tsa would leave the Shrakken alone, the Shrakken would stay away from Tsa worlds. Humans could ferry any needed data back and forth, and if necessary the exchanges could be done without personal contact. "A mail drop." An uninhabited satellite, was the idea the Tsa finally understood.

The creature wasn't convinced, though; she could tell. It asked questions; those she understood, she tried to answer. Then came a feeling of purpose, and the thing said, "Your humans would agree? And persuade the Shrakken? I am Elzh, once called Great Elzh of the seven ships-" She felt a pang of loss. *Why?* "I have right to speak for Tsa-Drin; my saying would bind."

The breath Lisele drew then was out of the rhythm she tried to hold. After all, what authority did *she* have? Not doodly! So she said, "I can propose it. I'll have to find my people-" *If you haven't killed them*, but by main force she kept that thought carefully hypothetical and without feeling. "-and we'll need to talk with the Shrakken leaders. *You* mustn't be anywhere around then, of course. So-"

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What else? *Inconnu Deux!* "There was a human ship here. It-"

"It escaped. Destroying two of ours, as it went. And now has come back, with a small one that killed another Tsa ship." Again the pang of loss, and now Lisele understood it.

But then what-? "I'm sorry. That's all part of what we need to stop. But if another human ship comes here, you mustn't attack it. You see?" So the *Deux* was back! But where, and in what condition? Never mind, for now; stick to cases, as Tregare would say. "We humans can't help, if we're stuck here on Shaarbant."

A slow thought, then. "True seeming. And I cannot help you largely, either. Except guide you, to return where I found you."

Lisele shook her head. "You can do better than that. Lift this ship and scout the area, in case my people have moved on. Then, I'm not sure how to work this, yet, but maybe you could fly us all over near the Shrakken headquarters." If the humans would agree to be doped asleep so everybody could stand each other? She winced at the idea of trying to persuade Tregare to any such arrangement, but...



A sad note in Elzh's thought. "That, I wish could do. But at landing, human mind-thrusts affected our pilot, and the ship did not land well. At now, it cannot lift again."

"You're sure about that?"

"Very sure. I am Elzh, I said. I command, and I know my ship."

"What about your scoutships?"

"Scoutships? Like the little things we saw, once cycles ago, and again now? We have no such."

Nothing to say to that; why should Elzh lie? Then she felt the Tsa's new thought in her mind, and decided to say it first. "Yes; I'll open my eyes. It was just-I didn't dare risk any disturbing stimulation, before." Her eyes opened; she blinked a couple of times, to get focus. Elzh's features were more pronounced, more emphasized than Ceevt's had been, and the skin was a little darker. Otherwise the adult Tsa looked pretty much like the young.

Through her mind went a ripple of wry amusement; not hers, she knew, but Elzh's. The Tsa must have caught her puzzled feeling; it said, "I see how you see me. I would not like to see me that way." A picture came-of herself, Lisele, but seen through some distorting screen that, made her look... no,

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not ugly, but utterly ludicrous. How could such a contrived, flimsy creature *work!* Involuntarily she laughed, then forced herself to stop. "What did you do?" Elzh seemed puzzled. "Can you do it at will?"

"Show me that picture again," and when it came, she laughed, and this time didn't try to stop until she'd finished. "You can send pleasure, also! We had not known that."

"Hey." She leaned forward. "Maybe we *can* get along." Later, though, eating the mushlike foods the Tsa commander offered her, she wasn't quite so sure. Heartburn played hob with the alpha state. But Lisele managed.

She was tired to the edge of collapse; before sleep, though, she needed a bathroom. She had a time finding words that meant anything to Elzh; when she did, the Tsa opened a sliding panel and showed her various fixtures that used water in one way or another. Then the creature demonstrated how to work the lights, and left her. She tried the door; it wasn't locked, but she was in no hurry to go anywhere. Not until morning, at least.

Back to the bathroom, she studied the fixtures. They weren't like anything she was used to, and she couldn't decide which was what. Finally she made a guess and hoped she was right; the gadget cycled out looking clean, at any rate. Then she turned the lights down, and looked at the big soft yellow bowl. The temperature was comfortable; she could use her clothes for a pillow. She undressed, crawled into the bowl, and slept.

She woke feeling cheerful, and looking around the alien room didn't break that mood. After all, hadn't she *talked* with Tsa? But that step, Lisele knew, was only a start; now she had to follow through. And a few minutes later, she was ready to begin.

She found no intercom or signal system she could recognize, so she opened the door and went out, into a bright-lit blue-green corridor. Tsa walked past her in both directions; she tended to her breathing and wondered how she'd recognize Elzh. The aliens looked at her, and she felt very light mind-touches. *Elzh told them about me; that's why they're not startled.* Speaking to all of them in general, she said, "I'd like to find Elzh, please."

She received the same kind of impression-flow, and a little of the chime sounds that she'd first had from Ceevt and the commander. Then from someone-she couldn't tell which, and

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they all looked alike: "Elzh." One made a kind of beckoning move, so that had to be the one who'd responded. It turned, looking back, and she followed. Upship, passing other Tsa and now not at all nervous about them, she followed her guide and wasn't surprised to come into the Tsa equivalent of Control. Everything was different, of course-but she bet she could learn the setup pretty quick.

"Elzh," said the guide, and from a central control position, one rose and came to her. Now, by a round notch in its left ear, that she hadn't consciously noticed before, Lisele recognized Elzh. In the Tsa way, the words came to her. "You are all right?"



"I'm fine. Hungry, though. And then somebody should help me find my people. Or do we need to talk some more, first?"

"Eat and talk, same time. With two others, if agreed. In mindsay and indling, very close to me."

Indling? Maybe the meaning would come clear in the talk, without her asking. "All right."

"Tserln. Idsath." And as Lisele followed the Tsa commander out of its control room, two others joined them.

She expected they'd go someplace like the *Deux's* galley, but found herself entering a cramped cubicle with a small, low table and several of the bean-bag stools. Dull green, these. Elzh sat; so did Lisele and the other two. All well and good, but where was the food? Last night, someone had brought the trays in with the little dishes of various-tasting mush. Now Elzh reached and opened out the table top both ways from center, doubling the thing's area. And in the central opening thus revealed, rose first one tray and then three others stacked beneath it-each legged to stand, one above the next, about a decimeter. Elzh handed her the top one and she repressed a sigh. The same dishes of van-colored mush, the same clumsy spoon to eat with. No liquid to drink. Oh, well. . .

Of the seven dishes, this time she thought she knew how to choose the digestible ones by smell and taste. Last night she'd been too tired to pay heed until her stomach complained, and that had been too late. Now she found four things she liked, and wondered how she'd managed more than one bite of any of the others. After the exploratory tastes and decisions she ate slowly. And when, she thought, would the talk begin?

The Tsa, she noticed now, finished one dish at a time, and each in the same order. Too late for her to try to conform to that

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game of protocol-and the grey-pink mixture they were just beginning was one she'd had to discard, anyway. Ulcer bait, that stuff!

Eizh paused in feeding. "You surprise those who see you today; you keep your sendings smooth. Do the Tsa treat you well, also?"

"Yes, sure." She nodded. "I asked them to find you for me, and one brought me along to you. That's pretty good."

Elzh's sending, then, came quick and rich, confusing her. Similar flashes came from the others; she realized they must be talking together. Then Elzh said, "Time now, meet Tserln and Idsath." Each in turn moved a hand, and Lisele thought she knew which was which-but looked closely, trying to see how to tell them apart.

Finally she thought she had it-not enough to spot either of them in a crowd, but to distinguish one from the other, and from Elzh. Tserln had lighter skin and narrower ears; Idsath's muzzle was wider. Enough of that; waiting, she listened.

Hesitantly, one "spoke" to her; from eye movements, Lisele guessed it was Tserln communicating. "-that we have not to harm each other, your and my people. And the Shrakken, also?" The Tsa went on, playing back what she and Elzh had said, the night before. "Is true?"

She nodded. "I think it can be done; I'm going to try." Then the third Tsa, Idsath, went through the whole same routine. Lisele wondered if the Tsa were a little slow in the brains, and then decided it must be hard for people used to multipoint telepathy, to deal one-on-one with an outsider. A different way, was all, so she stayed patient. And considering the alternative, she'd better! ...

When Idsath was satisfied, again the three Tsa began their flickering interchange of images, too fast for Lisele to recognize. Definitely *not* slow in the brains! Now, without the need to concentrate on talking, her mind began to slip into worry-what had happened to Rissa and Tregare and the rest? But she felt the Tsa getting disturbed, and caught a flicker of almost-pain; determinedly, she put her worries back on automatic hold, where she'd been keeping them. And could feel the Tsa mind-touches relax. But how, she wondered, did they manage to handle their own worries?

Then Elzh said, "When you feel ready, I take you to the place where I found you. There is nothing else there, though-

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your people or anything of them. Will the taking be of the help you need, to find them?"

She thought, then said, "I think so. When your-" No, she mustn't say attack.



"When I left our camp I ran downhill. In daylight now, I think I can find my way back."

"Then if you are fed enough, do we go there now?"

"Yes, I guess so." Then a wish came to her. "Elzh-could I see Ceevt again, before we go? Because we might never have been able to talk without hurting, you and I, if it hadn't been for him."

All three Tsa blinked once, and Elzh said, "You and Ceevt to greet parting, is correct; the young will meet us here. But Ceevt is not a him. Nor a her-as you, I think. Nor yet a-" The image made no word she knew. "Grown to fullness, Ceevt will be those things. But not as a young. With you, this is not so?"

Explaining puberty to the Tsa was more than Lisele wanted to tackle, especially since it sounded like their own biology was pretty complicated. All she said was, "I'm a her; yes."

They were all getting up now; Elzh opened the door and they followed him out. The three Tsa were much of a height; Lisele could look over the tops of their heads, but just barely. As they turned to go along the corridor, rapid footsteps came from behind, and Lisele turned to see a smaller Tsa approaching. "Ceevt?"

"Yes," said Elzh. "Our young." The way Elzh said it, Lisele caught two meanings. *Our*. Elzh and Tserln and Idsath. Well, maybe so. The other meaning was that Ceevt was the *only* young around here. If she had it right, and she wasn't betting much on that.

Ceevt came closer to her, slowed and stopped within touching distance. The small Tsa stood breast-high to her; it looked up and blinked once. "*You aren't rnindbeast!*" And the touch of its thought was like soft laughter.

On total impulse and no thought at all, Lisele knelt and hugged the young Tsa. Seconds later, she realized she'd taken a terrible risk, for she felt the adult minds reach to crush her-and then draw back. Elzh's thought came: "Made a saying first, you should have. But it is all right."

The young Tsa smelled like spice, up close at nuzzling range-like the bowl she'd slept in. It was heavy, all right; she could feel that. And its arms were strong, hugging her in turn.

Something warm and wet stroked her ear; Ceevt was licking

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it. Well, if that's the way they did-she stretched to return the caress. Then a hand patted her shoulder, and Elzh said, "Enough. Stand now." She did; she and the young Tsa released each other. Elzh spoke again. "Not the power to decide, has Ceevt, but I bind it now. The young has made you Tsa. One of us." And her ear got wet again.

A little later, when Tserln and Idsath had gone somewhere with Ceevt, Lisele and Elzh left the Tsa ship and set out walking. Quickly she decided that Tsa weren't much for hiking; if she moved faster than a stroll, Elzh fell behind. She wondered if the alien was used to a lesser gravity. Then she chuckled- after all, it hadn't walked a quarter of the way around Shaarbant, as she had!

"You send pleasure. Why?"

"Nothing important. I'm enjoying our walk, is all." The mind-touch had an uncertain feel to it, and withdrew.

The Tsa ship sat in a flat clearing; when they topped the small surrounding ridge, Lisele looked across a wide, steep ravine. Stopping, she gazed at the far side in search of the knoll she'd climbed the day before. She saw one, a bit down from the crest as seen from this perspective, but wasn't sure it was the right place. With her fingers she measured its angle from the sun. At least, she could try it for starters.

Elzh, watching, asked what she did. "Trying to figure where I have to go, on the far side of this gulch. I think I have it now." She turned to face the Tsa. "You'd better go back. You mustn't meet my people before I have a chance to explain to them."

"You think that with your telling, they can do as you do?"

"Meet with you, talk, without setting off mind-pain?" She shook her head. "I don't know. Some can, maybe. We need to find a way to test, that doesn't hurt a lot or even kill somebody, maybe. Do you have any ideas?"

Slow, the Tsa's thought came. "Only that I must do the meeting of these others, and singly-and you, to help, should be there."

It wasn't much: far as it went, though, it made sense. "All right." But the way Elzh walked, the humans had better do most of the traveling. "Keep watch on this spot. When I can, I'll bring somebody back here. And you come out by yourself; right?"

"Not far enough." The meaning wasn't clear, so she



waited. "Here, if a human sends fierce pain, it would reach my ship, and all Tsa there might react, and kill it." Elzh pointed. "Below, there, where rock will shield. By that outcrop?" Sure; the way the boulder jutted, she could recognize and find it again. "All right. I'll come here: the other can wait down there." "It suffices. I will have watch kept for you." She couldn't think of anything else that needed saying, so she gave a good-bye gesture, a sort of wave, and turned and started down the steep slope.

The valley held no breeze; heat soon had her thirsting. No matter; at the bottom, she remembered, a stream ran. Climbing down became automatic, as Lisele's mind centered on what had happened to her, and what would happen *now*.

For openers: did she trust Elzh? She guessed so. But why? Puzzling at the question, she found an answer. It was because people can lie with words but the Tsa didn't *send* words, only feelings and intentions that her own mind somehow translated. She tried to think how she might convince Tregare of her certainty, and shrugged. He shouldn't be the first to meet Elzh, anyway; he'd need some examples before he could shed his own wary mistrust. If he could do that, at all. Well, obviously, not everybody should even try to speak with the Tsa. Certainly the Shrakken couldn't-not yet, anyway.

Rissa, she decided, was her best first bet. Lisele knew some of her mother's history, and had seen how she operated under stress, enough to have that confidence. Rehearsing what to say, how to explain, Lisele was still at it when she reached the stream. The water tasted fresh and clean; when she'd had enough of it, she splashed some over her head and face. Refreshed, she began the long uphill climb.

She thought of her own experience; how had she and Elzh managed it, breaking through the reflexes of pain and retaliation? Well, they hadn't, of course; not by themselves. Without the lucky accident of Ceevt's coming, the young who knew nothing of attack and defense, maybe they never would have. Elzh hadn't been carrying that energy gun for nothing! Lisele shivered for a moment, then shook free of feeling spooky. It *had* worked out, and that was that!

The slope's curve, above, hid the knoll that was her destination. She rechecked the sun's angle; it would have arced away from the position she'd sighted, but in this short time, not by much. When, panting more than a little, she came in sight of that

knoll, she wasn't far off course. And it was the one she wanted, all right.

She didn't have to climb all the way to it; the camp had been a little farther down. Estimating her direction, she turned toward it, and in a few minutes she found where it had been.

Nobody was there. Nobody, and only scattered remnants of their gear, stuff they hadn't bothered to take along.

She turned back. Before she pushed on toward Sassden- because, thinking her lost, that's where they would go-she might as well let Elzh know he needn't bother keeping watch.

XXIV. Rissa

When the Tsa attack ended, Rissa found herself still on her feet, leaning against a tree. Breathing deeply, she relaxed most of the pain from her head. A patch of light moved; she saw Tregare stumbling along, shining a handlamp here and there. "Bran?"

He turned; light flashed in her eyes and then he pointed the beam lower. "Standoff, Rissa! I felt how to throw it back at them. The pain leveled off; maybe I gave as good as I got." He staggered, but caught his balance. "Takes it out of you,



though." He came to the tree and sat against it; Rissa knelt and gave him a brief hug.

She said, "I am not certain what I tried to do-block the mind attack, negate it? For a time I thought I succeeded, but-" The handlamp slipped from his grasp; she picked it up, brushing her hair out of her eyes with the other hand. "Bran-are you all right?"

"I'll live." His voice came bitter. "That's more than I can say for Sevshen. And Stonzai's in some sort of fit, or coma."

Indrawn breath whistled through her teeth. "And the others?"

"I don't know yet. Haven't found them. *Lisele*-"

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"I know, Bran. I had best go search." Getting up on her feet was hard, but she did it. "You will be all right here?"

His hand touched her leg. "Go ahead. For *Lisele*, look downhill. The last I saw or heard of her, she was headed that way."

Rissa looked at the dark sky, then along the short distance the handlamp lit. "I will look for her, and call. But another light, as a beacon, might help her find her way back. If you can locate one."

Tregare sighed. "Right; I'll try." She patted his shoulder and moved off, shining the light back and forth ahead of her.

She found Stonzai first. The Shrakken iay stiff and twisted, back arched, writhing; the triangular mouth gaped and the eyes were closed so tightly that wrinkles showed around them. Breath came in irregular, shuddering gasps. Rissa bent to put a hand on the heaving chest. "Stonzai?" No response. Futilely, Rissa tried other words and touches to reach the alien; finally she shook her head and went on.

Across the clearing, Sevshen looked like a still-picture of Stonzai-the same distortions, but no movement or sound. Grimacing, Rissa turned away, and tried to decide where next to search.

At the edge of level ground, where the slope dropped away, she paused. In the quiet she heard muffled sobs below, and turned the light that way. Motion caught her eye; a closer look showed her a foot, sticking out of underbrush and moving. She hurried down in time to help Jenise Rorvik get free of the clump of bushes. "Jenise?"

"Oh, Rissa!" The woman's lunge to hug her almost knocked Rissa off her feet. "I thought they'd-I thought they were killing me!"

Rissa's instinctive surge of sympathy died on a practical note. "Did you fight their attack? And to what effect?"

"Fight it? *How*? I-"

"Never mind. Let us get you to the camp." With an arm around Jenise, Rissa helped her climb to the clearing. At its edge, Rissa heard noises to their right, and turned the lamp to show Hagen Trent getting to his feet. Blood streaked his face, but it was caked and clotted, not flowing.

He squinted into the light; Rissa turned it briefly toward her own face, then at the ground between them. She could still see him, though dimly, as now he grinned. "Hi! That damned onslaught set me running, and while I was still trying to stop, I

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ran me into a tree or something and got knocked cold as a pickle."

Under the circumstances his good humor was contagious. "Well," said Rissa. "You seem to have survived in good order. Have you seen *Lisele*? Or have you, Jenise?"

Two negatives-and Tregare, approaching now, added a third. So, using other working handlamps he'd found, he and Rissa and Trent searched downslope for *Lisele*. Jenise stayed to tend Stonzai, though no one had any idea how to help the alien.

Down the hill, Tregare pointed out a trail of bent and flattened ground-cover. But it petered out in naked ground, with no continuation on the far side of the bare patch. Further search, and shouts, brought no success. So finally, choking on the words, Rissa called a halt. "This task needs daylight-and some rest, if not sleep, for all of us." They climbed back to the camp. Rissa did not expect to sleep, herself, but only for a brief time did she lie awake.

In the morning Stonzai was more or less aware-able to walk and to eat, but not talking. Aside from seeing she was fed, there was nothing the others could do. In any case, their attention centered on two things: *Lisele*'s absence, and the tip of a spacecraft that showed above forest growth, across the valley. The *Tsa*? "Who else?" said Tregare. But



enemies or no enemies, the group made a sweeping search of the valley slope. No sign of Lisele, though; the girl simply was not there. So everyone straggled back up to camp.

It seemed to Rissa, fighting the sick ache of her daughter's loss, that the group was waiting for someone to make a decision. Looking across to the Tsa ship, she said, "Bran Tregare-what is it that we do now? Wait here, for the Tsa to strike again? Cross this great ravine and attack their ship, *and their deadly minds*, with handguns? Go to ground somewhere, and try to hide?" He said nothing, and now her voice rose. "Do you decide, or do I?"

Answering, he sounded like a man trying to be patient and reasonable. "You don't give very good choices, do you?"

"Because there *are* none." For the first time, she wondered if marrying this man had been a mistake. But then she saw him grin.

"I know that. I'm just trying to think through, what we do have." His hand raised to halt her answer. "What's hanging us up is that we haven't the faintest clue how to find Lisele."

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Frowning, he paused for Rissa's nod. "We've hit our best licks and struck out. Well, what I say is, if the princess is on her own, she'll make it; she'll head for where we were all going. If she's caught by the Tsa, or-" He gulped. "-or dead, we can't do any good, anyway." He looked like someone expecting to be hit with an axe. "So I say we pick up and go on-get to Sassden, like we intended." His mouth twisted. "I'm sorry, Rissa. That's the only move that makes sense."

"Of course it is, Bran." Now, through her hurt, she tried to smile. "I was afraid you would not see it."

Tregare dug the hole, in the shade of a large tree but far enough away to avoid striking major roots. After Rissa stripped the dead Shrakken's harness of all useful gear and supplies, Tregare and Hagen Trent gently lowered Sevshen into the grave. Tregare looked over at Stonzai, who had watched briefly and then gone to sit a few meters distant, facing away. "D'you think, Rissa, we should do some kind of ceremony?"

"Just a moment." She went to Stonzai, called the Shrakken's name. "We must bury Sevshen now. Is there anything your people do at such a time?"

"Cannot do. Not the things or people have, here. Not the sounds or scents. No. Over him the dirt put." Stonzai would say nothing more, so Rissa went back to Tregare and explained.

"In shock, that one," he said. "Well, we plain don't have time to wait around for her to snap out of it." He put the shovel to dirt, then paused. "*Something* should be said. So I'll say it." He cleared his throat. "Sevshen, we never did get to know each other. But I'll say this: you pulled your weight."

Packing and loading-up didn't take long. They chose a route that led far down the valley, away from the Tsa ship, toward the farside gap that looked easiest to scale. But once they had started, Rissa felt an urge to have a closer look at the enemy. "Bran-I am going to make a side trip, a reconnaissance. If I do not catch up before dark, camp beside the stream so that I can find you."

He protested, but she would not change her mind, so they kissed and she headed back up the valley. "Peace save you, be *careful!*" he called after her, and she waved in reply.

Orienting herself by the knoll above last night's camp, she climbed the valley's opposite side. She thought she knew the approximate direction of the Tsa ship, and when she peered over

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a minor ridge and saw the thing, she hadn't missed her aim by much. She ducked back behind the ridge's crest and moved to her left, where she would be nearer the ship. Then she belly-crawled through undergrowth, as far as she could go without running out of cover, and looked.

Her mini-binocs had seen better days; the right barrel was cracked, and had been full of swamp water more than once. Residual sediment blurred the image to that eye, and the left-hand objective lens was marred by scratches and a tiny, jagged impact crater.

But out of the ship that differed subtly from those she knew, she saw the robed creature waddle down the ramp and come toward her.



Straight, directly toward her.

No mind-touch yet; subvocally, Rissa thanked peace for that much blessing. She wriggled backward, until the edge of slope masked her from the approaching alien. Then she turned and ran downhill, heedless of footing, trying to gauge how long she had before the Tsa reached the edge, and could look down and see her.

A place to hide! At one side of vision was a jagged rock; she turned toward it. Her mind's clock said she was running out of time; plunging down through brush and gravel she slid sidelong, to stop behind the jutting crag and slightly under its overhang. Breathing hard, not daring to peep around the rock's edge, she waited. But took time to check her handgun, wishing it were an energy weapon, not a mere needle-gun. Then she tried to blank her mind, to be non-existent. Looking at the rock before her, in her thoughts she *was* rock.

The creature must have held its mind well. Very near, she heard its movements, before any mind-touch came. And what she felt, then, was a sense of question, and a faint ghost of chime-sounds. Puzzlement broke her concentration. Image came, of a Shrakken, and without intent she saw dead Sevshen, and-*you killers!* And the Tsa struck with pain.

Rissa whimpered; her hand lost the gun. Now she set her mind to give nothing, built a mental wall and felt acid lick it, like fire. An inert wall, then-one that wouldn't react! But the pain came and went, and so did her control of her own mind.

Not by her choosing, her eyes opened; she found she was standing, not hiding behind the rock at all. And she saw the robed creature she'd seen before; only its head was exposed

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with part of a real face but not all. Not moving, it stood there, throwing agony. Groaning, Rissa shook her head and reached for the gun she no longer had. She couldn't find it.

All right! She concentrated on *how* her mind hurt, and pushed back in the same fashion. Suddenly the alien made a jerking, backward move, then stood still again. Mouth drawn wide in agony, Rissa felt her face pull into a predatory grin. "How-" She gasped it. "How do you like some of your own medicine?"

And how was she doing it? She did not know-only that repeated exposure to Tsa attacks had created responses in her. Her pain ebbed, then grew again. Hearing her breath make a snarl, Rissa forced her mind to *push*-and felt something, outside her, begin to crumble. "*Now!*"

"No! This is not necessary!" *No real voice said that.*

"No, please stop! You don't have to; it's all right!" And that voice, Rissa knew from somewhere. But the Tsa mind-attack then, with a strangely gentle power, shoved Rissa off the edge of awareness.

She did not let go; as she tumbled, she felt the other falling with her.

XXV. Lisele

If she hadn't taken the wrong trail, deep in the ravine where she could see no landmarks, Lisele would have been there sooner. As it was, she came breathless around a switchback to see Rissa point a gun at Elzh, then drop it as the Tsa's mind-touch struck. Pain came to Lisele, but it came diffused, not concentrated.

She tried to call out, but no sound emerged. She stood, frozen, and managed one outcry before her mother and the alien, almost in unison, slowly collapsed. She ran, then, and knelt beside Rissa.

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"Are you all right?" No answer; Rissa was certainly knocked out. Breathing, though,



and Lisele saw her eyelids flutter. She looked uphill toward Elzh; the Tsa hadn't moved yet. She went to it, and saw the nostril-fringes flutter rhythmically.

Now what? If they both woke up, the whole thing would happen all over again, for they lay in plain sight of each other. *But what if-?* Moving Elzh was out of the question, but Rissa wasn't all that heavy, and the nearest hummock lay downhill from her. Getting her mother up into a fireman's carry wasn't easy, and Lisele's legs quivered with strain, but she made it down and around the hummock without falling, and managed to dump her burden on the ground fairly gently. And now the mound of dirt shielded Rissa and the Tsa from each other.

Rissa showed no signs of waking, but Lisele looked uphill and saw Elzh begin to move. She hurried up toward the Tsa, but a few meters away, mind-touch stopped her. Mind-touch with more than a hint of pain, as Elzh sat up, eyes blinking. "You said you would explain to your humans. Instead you sent that one to kill me. Why should I not end you now?"

Shocked, Lisele gasped, fighting to quiet her mind. "But I didn't! I didn't even *find* my mother until just now, when you were-and I tried to get you both to stop. I-"

"Mother?" Pain ceased; Lisele felt curiosity replace the Tsa's anger. "Yes. I see the concept. You are that one's young."

"Yes, and I've got to go down there and be with her when she wakes up, so I *can* explain. And you stay here, Elzh, and if Rissa slips a little when she tries to talk with you- *If she will, at all!* "Please try not to hurt her."

Without waiting for an answer, Lisele ran back downhill.

Rissa woke slowly, her head in Lisele's lap. "What-?"

"*Now listen!*" Lisele said. "Elzh didn't want to hurt you, and he won't if you're careful, and keep your thoughts calm. You can't afford to get mad, or scared, so don't *let* yourself. Start breathing deep, now, and think how *nice* it'd be to have peace with the Tsa."

Frowning, Rissa shook her head. "What are you talking about?"

"Weren't you paying attention at all? Here's what happened." She told it as quickly as she could, from the time Elzh had carried her away, to the present moment. "The little one did it, you see-talked to me without hurting, so I knew to try it with Elzh. And Elzh is up there right now, willing to give you another

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chance," Rissa's brows raised, but Lisele didn't want to take time to explain all that. "Just remember-he's friends as long as we are."

Rissa smiled like a pale ghost of herself. "I do not have the *energy* to muster anger; in fact, you had best help me clamber up this hill. But if you can talk with those creatures, I can do no less than try."

It really went pretty well, Lisele thought; the lapses into disturbance and pain were few, and after a time, stopped altogether. Slowly, color returned to Rissa's face, and her quick understanding jumped past the need for long explanations. Watching and listening, Lisele decided she'd certainly guessed it right, the best choice of someone to lead off the discussions. Rissa had some improvements on the ideas Lisele and Elzh had put together; once again, Lisele admired the way her mother adapted to new situations.

When it came time to leave, Rissa introduced the Tsa to the human custom of shaking hands, and said, "We have our children to thank, for this peace we begin. Let us keep it well."

"The young, yes," said Elzh. "I will say to Ceevt, for you."

Later, following down the ravine toward the place where Tregare would choose a camp, Rissa said, "It will work, I think, Lisele. Some will be able to treat with the Tsa, and some will not. But I do not look forward to the task of convincing your father."



He still couldn't manage Lisele's alpha-state trick on his own hook, and maybe he never would. But for the purpose at hand, being able to talk with Elzh the Tsa, light hypnosis worked well enough; with a couple of dopy-pills

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to help, Rissa had been able to make the suggestions stick. "Friend" was the key-word; any time the Tsa mind-touch rubbed his nervous side the wrong way, he repeated it until the mental irritation eased. For a man who had lived on the raw edge of adrenaline as much as Bran Tregare had, he felt he was adjusting pretty well.

He looked past Elzh, across to Rissa. Her grief for her brother was still new and she made no attempt to hide it. For hours he'd held her, as-for the first time since he'd known her-she cried so hard he feared she'd hurt herself.

"If only he could have known," she said now. "The Tsa *cannot* lie. But poor Ivan, unable to trust..."

Tregare cleared his throat. "He's not the only one, might've made that mistake. The trouble was, Rissa-well, the way things stood, best we can know from what the *Deux* overheard at the last, he must have felt he couldn't take the *chance*."

"It is not understood," said Elzh, "how your colleague failed to recognize truth, and destroyed my other ship and himself. It is hoped that no such thing shall again occur."

Yeah, sure. "Friend," he subvocalized before speaking, because in the back of his mind, claws flexed, and he knew he couldn't afford them. "Ivan didn't know you," he said. "He couldn't. Until Lisele found out how to talk with you, nobody ever did. Don't downgrade Ivan Merchant." Again, for calm, he whispered the key-word.

Rissa's hand stroked his arm. "They do not, Bran. Be easy, as we must, here." He knew she was right, but still the easing was a struggle, before Tregare controlled his thought enough that the mind-touch gentled. Then behind him he heard sounds, and turned to see Lisele approach.

"The *Deux's* landed," she said. "At Sassden. Hagen spotted her coming down, and Tserin set him up a relay, to talk. Anyway, there's a scoutship there, that Ivan left, that can come pick us up. As soon as everybody's out of freeze, and Anders says that won't be long."

"Out of freeze?" But side-issues couldn't hold Tregare's attention; one question governed. "What's the ship's condition?"

Lisele shook her head. "Anders doesn't know, for sure. A lot of work, he thinks, and we need some parts. But no permanent damage, he's pretty certain."

"All right," Tregare said. "We'll see when we get there."
Ready to leave, he stood, but Rissa caught his arm. "The

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Tsa, Elzh, is not at ease. Because you are not, and Elzh knows you command. So say again the words of peace. *Say them, Bran, and mean them.*"

With the past flooding him-Ivan, *Dacia, Ellalee, Sevshen* -Tregare found the saying hard. But he set his mind and he did it.

Waiting in their new camp, the crater ridge giving insulation from accidental mental interplay with the Tsa ship, Tregare thought things over. The truce functioned-the truce that young Lisele had cobbled together, talking with Elzh and playing by ear. Well, he'd never thought his daughter, and Rissa's, was stupid!

Judging by Stonzai's reactions, the Shrakken wouldn't be able to shed fear of the Tsa, and mistrust. Not for a long time, anyway. But with humans working as go-betweens, and no direct meetings of Tsa and Shrakken-yes, the kid had called that one right, on the first bounce.

The Tsa, now. Once Tregare had been able to put his own fierce instincts under control, his natural curiosity took over-for here was a whole new intelligence to get to know! At Lisele's suggestion he learned the trick of putting his emotions at distance when talking with Elzh-and it did ease matters a lot. He not only got to know the former "admiral," but came to like him (well, he assumed Elzh was still male, though he didn't understand the Tsa sex-sequence).

Near as Tregare could tell, the Tsa chieftain was sincere. The whole mess was because Tsa couldn't shut off telepathic reception, and gave hurt for hurt by sheer reflex, while Shrakken and humans hadn't known they were *sending* pain.

Well, it was going to be tricky; no help for that. But if all parties pulled their socks up and paid some attention...

Tregare grinned. "Peace be primed, it can work!"



XXVII. Lisele

There wasn't any way the Tsa and Shrakken could meet in person; not yet, anyway. Lisele had seen Stonzai try it, and two others in test situations, and they'd all had to dive for shielding cover. And Elzh said, "No more, Lisele. *I* do not want their pain. We must avoid, they and we."

So at Sassden, where the *Deux* waited repairs, the Tsa delegation kept to itself in a riverside camp behind hills, at the place where Ivan, so long ago, had left the scoutship.

Some humans could deal with Tsa and others couldn't. Hagen Trent seemed to have no trouble at all, but Jenise Rorvik wouldn't even try, and Lisele couldn't blame her much. Jenise was hurting enough already, with her bad wrist healing from an attempt at corrective surgery. Maybe the plastic-laminate "bones" would restore movement and maybe not; Lisele was sure that Trent and Jeremy Crowfoot had done their best, but would it be good enough?

Another who avoided the Tsa was Anders Kobolak. Bewildered and resentful of his sister's death, the Second Hat took to his quarters and would see no one but his wife, Alina. Normally a temperate man, he stayed drunk for three days; then, a day later, he joined a group in the galley. Rissa said, "Are you better now, Anders?"

Looking well, Lisele thought, for a man just done with a binge, he nodded. "It needed some time, Rissa-for me to understand why it had to happen. But Ivan saw no choice, and Dacia wanted to be with him." Now he smiled, sort of. "I heard the tape this morning. The last thing he said was, he loved her."

After one meeting with Tsa, Tregare came back to the *Deux* and said, "I was talking with the young one; Elzh said I could. He's a cute little blob."

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"Not a he," said Lisele. "Or a she, either, or even a something I don't quite understand. Not yet. But Ceevt will be-all of them, if I have it right."

Tregare shook his head. "Well-whatever works."

Acting as go-betweens, the humans negotiated a firm agreement that Tsa and Shrakken would stay clear of each others' worlds. Only then did Tregare announce that both species would be given the FTL drive. "To spread word of the truce, as soon as possible." Actually the Shrakken had one ship fully converted to Hoyfarul specs, and now that Elzh no longer barred the way, that ship lifted from Shtegel port, to take word-and the specs-to Stenevo.

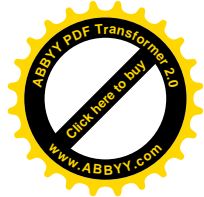
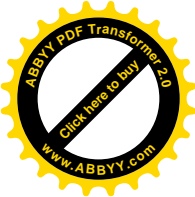
Also from Shtegel, where the Shrakken had their main labs and fabrication facilities, came components needed to repair *Inconnu Deux* and Elzh's two crippled ships, and modify those latter for FTL. The Shrakken had two other ships, but one was under repair and the other in process of FTL conversion, so that left the scoutship to do all the ferrying.

Sometimes Tregare flew it, and sometimes Rissa, when she wasn't busy getting reacquainted with baby Renalle. Lisele nagged until she was let to fly it in trajectory, later to do liftoff, and finally to land the thing. The landing wasn't the best she'd ever experienced, but she looked defiantly at her mother. "I *told* you I could do it. And next time I'll do it better." Rissa only shrugged. But the next chance they gave her, three trips later, Lisele made the promise good; she set the scout down, level-solid, with hardly a jar. And Rissa said, "Congratulations, Lisele. You do seem to have the makings of a good pilot." *Told you so!*

Then they all carried several loads of Shrakken-made electronic components over and up into *Inconnu Deux*. What with all the things that needed doing, Lisele hadn't been on the ship much, yet. Now, sweating after effort, she stopped off at the galley for a cool drink of fruit juice. What she got was the squeezings from local berries; it tasted good, though.

Looking for a place to sit, she met Arlen Limmer. She'd seen him at a distance once or twice, since he came out of freeze, but never to talk with. Now she looked at the tall, dark young man-not as tall, of course, as she recalled him-and said, "Hi, Arlen. Remember me? Come and sit down a minute."

With one eyebrow cocked, he looked at her. "You have to be Lisele. Aren't you? But you're older. I-"



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She laughed. "You froze your butt while I didn't, is all. Come on; let's talk."

"Sure." They sat; while Arlen ate, she sipped juice. He said, "You and Tregare, all of you, you really walked halfway around this planet? I heard you did." He grinned at her. "Hey, that must have been a real adventure. Lots of excitement, I'll bet."

"You could say that. It wasn't halfway around, though. More like a fourth, I think."

He shrugged. "It's still quite a way. Say-I notice your mother doesn't have long hair now. Why'd she cut it?"

Almost, Lisele smelled swamp mud; she felt the urge to scratch a scalp itch she didn't really have. "Oh, it got to be too much bother."

"Yes, sure." Finished with eating, Arlen sipped his coffee. "Y'know, the other day I had a chance to talk with a Tsa. What I can't see is why everybody thought they were such monsters."

Lisele looked at him. "Didn't they attack you in the *Deux*, when it lifted from Shaarbant?"

"I guess they did. I hadn't time to feel much of anything, though, before *zap*-I was in freeze. Your uncle Ivan-"

She felt uncomfortable. "My uncle Ivan did the best he could. He didn't freeze you on purpose, I understand, but-" Her turn to shrug. "Believe me, you were a lot safer that way."

"I guess you're right." He leaned forward. "Hey, Lisele- how old are you now? Bio-years, I mean?"

She wasn't certain. "Fifteen, maybe." She was stretching it, probably, but if *he* didn't know the difference... and he was still eighteen, of course. She felt herself frowning. "Why did you ask that?"

His cheeks reddened. "Well, you used to say-*you* know. And now you're not a kid. I thought maybe we could go walk up the river a way, where we could be by ourselves a little while, and-"

She shook her head. "Not now. There's a conference in about an hour, some people who haven't met with Tsa yet, and Elzh needs me to sit in. So I'm flying an aircar over with them, and-"

He laughed. "Oh, come on, Lisele. They don't need *you*. Tregare can handle it, he and Rissa. So why don't we-?"

"If Elzh says he needs me, he needs me."

Arlen grinned again. "All right. Why don't we take our walk tonight, then? That'd be even better, wouldn't it?"

Now she thought she understood. He wanted sex with her.

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Well, she could, if she chose; she was old enough. Just in case, maybe she should get a contraceptive implant from Rissa; it couldn't harm. And then, how many days was it, before the implant "took"? She didn't remember. It hardly mattered yet, though, because she didn't *know* Arlen well enough to want to be lovers with him. And he didn't know her, either, or what she'd done and survived, and what it meant to her.

He waited for her answer; she said, "Let's just get acquainted for a while, Arlen. Talking, like we are now."

"Well, all right; sure." He looked a little disappointed, she thought. But now it was time for her to leave, so she did.

Arlen was a nice kid, but he sure had a lot of growing up to do.

XXVIII. Elzh

Watching humans board aircar,
Elzh mindsaid gratitude to Lisele, the human young who would control it. Meeting



with new humans, changing them to *not*-mindbeasts, had held danger. But Lisele had said, "Elzh? When the mindspeak starts to turn harsh, send them *pleasure*." More, that young said, for his better understanding. A new thought, never tried with mindbeasts, but Elzh mindspoke Tserln and Idsath for gathering and aid, and they three agreed: to learn, as always. As correct, as understood.

At later, Lisele sent the three Tsa pleasure. "It worked, didn't it? I could feel you doing it, every time anyone got edgy. And it *worked*."

Into aircar now, Lisele, and the small construct rose with no jarring and little sounding of air. Until a ridge came between, Elzh watched its leaving. Much thought, Elzh had.

To follow two Tsa ships sent ahead. To mindsay the *changes* Elzh knew, so no need to attack mindbeast worlds. But long and

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long, to reunite with those two ships. If only Elzh could ride the ship that had come from nothing! For now he understood that coming; the Tregare human had told how the ship outpaced its own radiation, as no Tsa ship could ever do. "But one could, Elzh, once we give it the Hoyfarul conversion. And since you couldn't possibly ride the *Deux*—"

No. Too many humans still mindbeasts; too much effort, no rest from it, to keep their minds from sending pain. But Tregare told of time and time—that Elzh could wait cycles while his ships were made like to Tregare's, and still find forereaching Tsa ships sooner than by leaving without changes. Could overtake them before they approached next beastworld.

Tregare mind was harsh but gave truth. So Elzh would wait.

But not with those ships, would Elzh go. No; to Tsa-Drin, instead, his ship only. Not safe, for Elzh, but needed to do. Because-always to learn, as correct, as understood. But also *to obey*. And this that Elzh now did, speaking and learning with mindbeasts-*not* to obey Tsa-Drin, this was.

To human female Rissa, who mindfought as Tsa could do but not again since first meeting, Elzh told dilemma. A day and day ago, but still Elzh thought of her saying, "As Tregare might put it, bucking your brass beats hell out of burning your brains." Odd thought, but with clear meaning.

Now Elzh approached warm nest, mindreaching to feel where Tserln and Idsath waited-and Ceevt! Stopping, not to enter before this thought ripened, he heard his mind.

A time comes, when Tsa-Drin itself must obey. For. this new way is better than all the deaths and madness.

And if Tsa-Drin would not hear? Elzh's mind quirked; he felt it sending pleasure to himself.

Against ships that come from nothing, what can they do?

About the Author

F. M. BUSBY's published

science fiction novels include *Rissa Kerguelen*, the related *Zelde M'Tana*, *All These Earths*, and the now-combined volume *The Demu Trilogy* (*Cage a Man*, *The Proud Enemy*, and *End of the Line*). Numerous shorter works, ranging from short-shorts to novella length, have appeared in various SF magazines and in both original and reprint anthologies, including *Best of Year* collections edited by Terry Carr, by Lester Del Rey, and by Donald A. Woliheim. Some of his works have been published in England and (in translation) Germany, France, Holland and Japan.

Star Rebel, the first of two books concerning the early life of Bran Tregare, is set in *Rissa's* universe.

Buz grew up in eastern Washington near the Idaho border, is twice an Army veteran, and holds degrees in physics and electrical engineering. He has worked at the "obligatory list of incongruous jobs" but settled for an initial career as communications engineer, from which he is now happily retired in favor of writing. He is married, with a daughter in medical school, and lives in Seattle. During Army service and afterward he spent considerable time in Alaska and the Aleutians. His interests include aerospace, unusual cars, dogs, cats, and people, not necessarily in that order. He once built, briefly flew and thoroughly crashed a hang glider, but comments that fifteen-year-olds usually bounce pretty well.